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Esther Kirton



the author of *A Bad Beginning*

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HESTER KIRTON.

[Handwritten signature]

BY

KATHARINE S. MACQUOID,

AUTHOR OF "A BAD BEGINNING," "CHESTERFORD,"
ETC. ETC.

He who the sword of Heaven will bear,
Should be as holy as severe ;—
More nor less to others paying,
Than by self-offences weighing.—*Shakspeare.*

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CENTRO FILOLOGICO

VENEZIA

TO HIM

WHO ROUSED AND FOSTERED

A DORMANT TALENT,

I Dedicate this Book,

WITH LOVING GRATITUDE.



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HESTER KIRTON.

Book the First.

KIRTON'S FARM.

CHAPTER I.

A VISITOR AT KIRTON'S FARM.

THE afternoon had been unusually sultry even for the hot autumn of 18—. The twisted chimneys on the gaily-tiled roof of the little station at Driven looked redder and harder-baked than ever, the gables seemed to stand up more sharply, the waved barge-boards looked thinner and more like cardboard; everything near and about glistened with an unnatural metallic radiance, even to the face of the ticket-taker,—a pale, insolent-looking fellow, with a sprouting beard under his chin, something like an unhealthy satyr, in a blue coat and pewter buttons.

The train had just puffed itself out of sight again; the only passenger it had deposited, after looking at his coat-case, lounged through the station; the surly ticket-taker saying he might, perhaps, see a lad outside to carry his trunk for him.

The traveller, a tall, fashionably-dressed man, and singularly handsome, stood looking, with a dismayed countenance, at the dusty road stretched out before him. There was no vehicle to be seen, but a boy was standing near the door, evidently on the look-out for a job.

“How far to Kirton's Farm, my man?”

"May be a mwile, may be moor—can't tell'ee for sure," replied the boy, sulkily. Perhaps he did not feel sulky, but those loutish country lads with blue eyes and yellow hair, who, after a gaping stare, always answer questions over their left shoulder, are somehow suggestive of sulkiness.

The traveller looked still more disconcerted.

"I have a coat-case," he said; "can you carry it?"

"Show I wher't bide un I'll warn ye I'll do't," said the boy: he looked far less surly now.

The coat-case, a new dandified affair of solid leather, studded with large brass knobs, was soon on the lad's sturdy shoulder.

"Be ye thinking to bide at Kirton's Farm?"

"Yes, till to-morrow."

The boy grinned.

"I suppose Mr. Kirton has visitors sometimes?"

"I dwoan't know as ever the time is then," said the boy, chuckling. "Vis'tors! whoy, he be a mwisier, he be; an old skinflint, as rich as a Jew, though they do tell——"

"There is a daughter—Miss Kirton—is there not?" asked Mr. Hallam.

"Auh! Muss Heaster, do'ee mean? Well, 'ees, but ne'er a body sees much o' she. The owld man he kips she at whoam; folks do say as how he grudges the money to buy she gownds and such like fit to be seed in."

"Is that what you mean by calling him a miser?" said the gentleman, much amused.

"Lor' love 'ee, that bean't half." The boy fairly turned to look at him, for the corner of the portmanteau had hitherto intervened. "Whoy, a mwisier's a deal more nor that; whoy, I'm blessed if he wouldn't like to make folk live on cheese-parings and bacon-rinds, washed down wi' water. The men thay know 'un so well there bean't a one among 'em as 'ud meal in th' house if he could help it; it's a mortal wonder Muss Heaster and th' owld 'ooman wurn't starved long ago, and hisself too."

Mr. Hallam seemed to ponder over this information; his pace slackened, and he let the boy get ahead of him; perhaps he was considering whether he should find bacon-rinds and cheese-parings digestible. However, his mental colloquy, whatever might have been its subject, was apparently satisfactory; for, when they turned into a shady lane which the boy announced as the approach to the farm, he looked far more cheerful than when plodding along the dusty road.

Perhaps the relief from glaring sunshine might have occasioned this ; besides, the traveller was keenly alive to natural beauties, and the hawthorn hedge-banks between which he walked were covered with a profusion of wild flowers.

It was early autumn, so the colouring was bright and varied, making up by these qualities for the absence of the exquisite delicacy of the spring blossoms.

There were, abundantly, the gay scarlet poppy, the untidy white bladder campion, the starry yellow elecampane ; the honey-suckle, springing loftily above all, enfolding many an unwary spray of hawthorn in its perfumed but deadly embrace ; while at intervals shone out wreaths of the glossy-leaved black bryony, whose dark green shining leaves reflected its bunches of poisonous berries, fast assuming their many-coloured tints. Lightly, here and there, the white bryony hung in festoons ; that "Honesty is the best policy" seems exemplified in this plant ; it always manages to get the best place.

A clamorous barking of dogs soon told whereabouts the house was ; but for this, it might have been supposed a good way farther off still, it was so completely concealed by a thick plantation of young oaks ; one very gigantic tree at the gate spread its broad branches quite across the lane, making it shadier still. Looking along the lane, which appeared to run a mile or more beyond the farmhouse, the hedges were stunted and the country on either side more open ; and as the chalky path looked hot and white in the blazing sunshine, Mr. Hallam congratulated himself that his journey ended here.

But the trees did not extend beyond the gate ; from which an ill-kept stony road led straight to the house itself.

Mr. Hallam shivered as the kick of his new boots jarred and scraped against the rough bits of granite scattered along the road, and for some seconds he was so occupied in picking his way that he did not look up at the house.

When he did raise his handsome blue eyes, he saw before him a quaint, half-timbered manor-house, evidently of ancient construction. The timbers, above and below the windows, were set in a semicircular form, producing alternate crosses and circles along the front ; and if the spaces between them had not been barbarously whitewashed, would have been picturesque enough ; the house was surmounted by three irregular gables, the centre one being much the smallest. The windows of projecting lattice-work—filled with very small diamond-shaped panes—were supported

on brackets, and extended across the front from one gable-end to the other; clumsy iron contrivances for keeping the lattices open hung loosely from the lower part of the frames, and looked cumbrous enough to drag window-frame and all along with them.

The door was of later date, having as heading a depressed arch of solid oak.

Framed in verdure, the old farmhouse would have made a charming picture, but standing thus alone, with only a large pig-yard, knee-deep in black mud on one side, behind that again a formal, stiff rick-yard, and on the other one field seen stretching away after another into flat distance, it looked bald and cold—there was nothing to relieve the eye but the deep blue sky, against which the whitewashed walls stood out hard and chalky.

Probably in the rear of the premises there were barns, with tiled or thatched roofs glowing with the rich and varied hues successive July suns had burned in or on to them; and picturesque carts, and waggons, and smock-frocked farm-labourers might doubtless have been found also; but Mr. Hallam was far too tired of his dusty walk to wish to prolong it, so he pushed open the little white wicket-gate in the low fence that enclosed a neglected grass-plot in front of the house, walked up the stony path in the middle of it, and rang a broken bell-handle beside the entrance door.

While he was speaking to his guide, who seemed in a great hurry to get away, the door opened slowly, and an old woman appeared in the entrance.

She held the door firmly with one hand, as if to prevent ingress; but as she scanned the stranger inquiringly, she seemed satisfied that he had no evil intentions, and looked more placable—by nature she was evidently not meant to be cross; she was short and stout, with a cheerful, dark complexion, bright black eyes, and a merry-looking mouth, that seemed as if it ought to be more ready with a jest than with a reproof; but suddenly catching sight of the boy, her whole expression changed to one of peevish discontent.

“And what do ’ee want here, yer oudacious young vagabond, stabbleing about the place? Mischief, I’ll lay, when ye knows better nor I can tell ’ee, that Muster Kirton, he can’t stomach a boy about the place.”

“Well, I be a-goin’, Biz, so you’ve no call to scold,” and he held out his hand as Mr. Hallam extended his towards him. He gave a shrill whistle of delight when he saw a shilling in his palm, and, bounding off, was soon out of sight.

"Drat thay boys—ye'll maybe excuse me for saying so, sir, —but they're allus where they shouldn't ought to be, and in pettickler here they bean't not allowed. Be ye a-wishin' to speak to the muster?"

Before Hallam could reply, the old woman was put on one side, and a very tall grey-headed man took her place, and looked keenly and suspiciously at the stranger.

Spite of what he had heard in London, and of the boy's hints about Mr. Kirton, Frederic Hallam was pleased with his appearance; his clear complexion and benevolent forehead were not those generally belonging to a mean character; but there was a thinness in the lips, and a rigid firmness in the lower jaw, that in one more skilled in human nature might have awakened doubts.

He glanced from the young man's open, handsome face to his dress, and thence to his portmanteau.

Hallam raised his hat, and began to introduce himself, but Mr. Kirton stopped him.

"You mistake, sir; this is no inn for travellers."

"Mr. Kirton, I conclude; if you will be so kind as to look at this note, you will see that I do not come to you quite as a stranger."

The old man drew his tall form up more stiffly still, and pressed his lips more tightly together. As the letter was handed to him, he eyed Hallam so closely again before he opened it, that he added; "The letter is from your friend Mr. Goldsmith, who has entrusted me with some business papers he wishes you to sign."

Mr. Kirton opened the envelope, and read his letter slowly, keeping his visitor standing in the sunshine all the time. He was inwardly chafing, and had a great mind to ask permission to enter; but there was something so rigid and unbending about the old farmer, that he forbore.

When he had read it twice over, his countenance relaxed a little, and he invited Hallam to come in and rest himself. The visitor looked at his portmanteau reposing ignominiously on the grass-plot; he was just going to ask Mr. Kirton to have it carried indoors, when the farmer said, "You can let that be—it's safe; when you have eaten a meal with us and rested, one of the men shall carry it where you will."

Frederic Hallam was not easily daunted; he had generally, as he would have said, impudence enough for anything; but his wish to become the farmer's guest just then prevailed: he would not

risk a dispute with the reputed miser, which might injure his plans, though he shuddered at the thought of leaving his new portmanteau exposed to the inroads of dogs and fowls—some of the latter, ugly, bony-legged creatures, had begun to peck it already; but he was obliged to follow Mr. Kirton, who strode along the narrow, stone-flagged, whitewashed passage to the back of the house, where he threw open a door, and asked his visitor to walk in and sit down. Hallam gave him a packet, which he took almost rudely, and then left him abruptly.

There was a stone floor and no carpet in the great, gaunt apartment—it could hardly be called a room—in former times, probably the hall of the old manor-house; for tradition said that Kirton's Farm had been a favourite hunting-seat of King John's—a legend hard to credit when one contemplated the entirely arable nature of the surrounding country. Doubtless, the house, or some part of it, was very ancient, and the hall, as it was called, seemed to have been left in undisturbed possession of its antiquity: the walls were of dark, almost black, oak, panelled in small, octagonal compartments; the three windows were deeply recessed and considerably splayed, so that, although the external aperture was small, the window recess itself would have formed a seat for several persons; two long rough wooden trestles stood against the wall on one side—they had possibly supported the table planks of former times—and at intervals were ranged high oaken stools, as black and ancient-looking as the hall itself. What the roof had been formerly it was now difficult to determine, as it was ceiled between the three oak beams that spanned it at intervals; but its blackened aspect made one think irresistibly of a smoky chimney, and drew attention to the fire-place. Hallam had never met with anything of the kind before, and he walked up to it, and examined it closely. It must have been eight or nine feet across, and had on each side niches with seats cut in the solid wall; in the centre, from the red brick paving, rose two huge, ungainly metal dogs, each supporting what looked very like a cannon-ball; at the back was a massive plate of iron wrought in grotesque devices, and between this and the front, on a small raised brick platform, were two smaller andirons; from the chimney itself hung a hook, such a hook as Giant Cormoran thrust down the chimney when he roused the indignation of Jack the Giant Killer.

Mr. Hallam, being essentially a man of this generation, was not romantic, and he shuddered when he thought of the ways of former times, and of the uncouth feeding this hall had probably

witnessed ; he hoped the rest of the house looked more habitable than this barbarous relic of the past, for he still intended to carry his point of passing the night there.

He was growing tired of waiting in such a dungeon, and although the stone floor was cool after his dusty walk, the oak settles were most uninviting to a tired traveller.

A shuffling sound in the passage, and then the old servant appeared with a large coarse yellow jug in her hand.

"The master 'ud like to see ye in his room. I thought, maybe, you'd be dry arter your walk, sir, so I brought ye a drink o' water."

Hallam, who really was very thirsty, and had advanced eagerly for, as he supposed, a draught of "home-brewed," fell back with a strong expression of disgust.

"Water, my good woman ? no, thank you, I'm not fond of water ; I'm afraid if I tried it, I might astonish my inside."

"Well, to be sure, now," said the old woman, peevishly, "and I thought ye'd be glad of a drink—some folks is more nice than wise, maybe. I likes water better nor beer any day."

"I'm sure I am particularly obliged to you," said Hallam ; who never offended any one if he could help it, on the ground that you cannot tell who may turn out useful to you in the end ; "but I wonder now if you could be so very kind as to find me water for another purpose—I mean, to wash my hands and face before dinner."

She laughed.

"Soap and water costs nothin', so 'ees welcome to as much o' that as ye like ; come along this way, and I'll find 'ee a cloth."

To Mr. Hallam's mingled dismay and amusement, she led him into the kitchen, another huge, stone-flagged place. It was evidently as old as the hall ; they probably formed the nucleus around which the rest of the house had grown. It was open to the roof, with massive dust-covered rafters running across ; to one of which was fixed a rack, filled with numerous sides of bacon ; while hams, pigs' faces, onions, &c., hung from the others. On one end of the rough kitchen-table, she set a yellow basin of the same coarse ware as the jug, a great piece of mottled soap, and a rough, but clean jack-towel. Mr. Hallam looked aghast, but he was not really effeminate, though he did not mind being thought so, and, pulling off his coat and carefully shielding his scarf and waistcoat with the towel, he gave his face and whiskers a sluicing that fairly astonished Biz, and splashed her table considerably.

"Well, you be a brave 'un at the water, you be ; ye takes to it like a spannel. I thought somehow ye'd be too much of a coddle like for that sort o' thing."

"And why did you think so—Biz, I think the boy called you ?"

He had special reasons for wishing to ingratiate himself with the old servant.

"Well, I dunno ; there was somethink or other about 'ee as minded I of a cat—no offence—whiskers an' all, as 'ee came picking yer way up the road, just as if yer boots wur made o' egg-shells."

Hallam burst out laughing.

"Well done, Biz. What's your real name ? That's a nickname, I suppose."

"'Ere-a-mussy—'tain't a name at all. I wur christened Elizabeth, but Muss Heaster, her found Biz wurn't so hard when her wur a little 'un."

"Ah, I see ; but really, Biz, you ought to have a better approach made to the house," and then, to her great amusement, he pulled out of its rose-coloured, morocco case an elegant little pocket-comb, and, marching up to the brilliant array of dish-covers, one of the few ornaments of the kitchen, began to arrange and comb out to their full length his silky, auburn whiskers. "Now, look at my boots," he said, raising one foot on to the kitchen-table. "A woman of your experience, Biz, knows better than I can tell you, that that boot's destroyed—isn't, in fact, fit to wear again ; to me, as it happens, it isn't of much consequence, but suppose it had been a poor fellow to whom a pair of boots was an object—it's painful to reflect upon it, it is really, Biz," and then, pocketing his comb, he washed his hands, carefully polishing each finger-nail separately with his pocket-handkerchief, and put on his coat.

CHAPTER II.

HESTER.

MR. KIRTON'S study was a small room about eight feet square, little better than a closet, evidently constructed in the thickness of what had once been the outer wall, for it could only be entered from the front parlour, the door of which, as Hallam's quick eye

told him, was next to that leading into the kitchen, which lay between the parlour and the hall on the left-hand side of the house ; the rooms on the other side were empty, and never used except for lumber.

Biz hurried him through the parlour, so that he could only see that it was panelled in black oak like the hall, looked dingy and uninhabited, and had a smell of close air about it. He found Mr. Kirton seated on a high stool at his desk, poring over some papers. He looked up at Hallam, and motioned him to sit down.

"Have you been long in Mr. Goldsmith's office?"

Hallam slightly coloured.

"Does Mr. Goldsmith say I have been in his office?"

"No, he does not say so, but that doesn't answer me."

"I am only a trusted friend of Mr. Goldsmith's, not one of his clerks."

"Then what on earth does he send you down here for?" said Mr. Kirton, rudely.

"I came here to witness your signature to those papers I gave you, and, if necessary, to sign anything you wish attested."

"True, true," the old man muttered; "but he should not have sent a stranger—he knows I can't endure strangers—no offence to you, sir."

"I am extremely sorry; how very wrong in Goldsmith, for I suppose he's aware of this dislike of yours?"

"Well, never mind if he is—it's done now." Mr. Kirton disliked what he called "palaver" worse than strangers. "We'd best get business over before dinner-time."

Hallam thought the signing, and blotting, and folding would never be over, then Mr. Kirton bid him, almost sternly, put the papers up carefully, as they belonged to Mr. Goldsmith.

"Not that they are of any particular value," he added, keeping his eyes keenly fixed on the young man, "but it would be troublesome to Mr. Goldsmith to replace them—troublesome, nothing more."

A curious clashing sound seemed to come from the wall; the old man made an attempt at a smile.

"That is Biz's signal to dinner. You see, sir, we're humbler folk than you're used to, I reckon: we've no dining-parlours nor drawing-rooms here; we eat in the kitchen, and get our victuals hot and hot."

If Hallam had not been determined to dine at Kirton's Farm,

this announcement would probably have induced him to take his departure at once ; but, spite of the shocks his fastidious refinement had received, he began to consider the whole affair a good joke and a new phase of life, and resolved to see the end of it.

He followed the old farmer along the stone passage into the kitchen ; a coarse cloth was spread on the table, garnished with green-handled knives and forks, and common white plates and dishes. But Mr. Hallam's attention was attracted by a young girl who stood at her place on one side of the table, evidently waiting for them.

He bowed, and she made a sort of movement in return. Mr. Kirton did not seem to think any introduction necessary, but pointed to a seat opposite his daughter, whom he called Hester.

Hallam could not take his eyes from her face ; he had determined to find her agreeable, but he was surprised to see her so pretty.

She was apparently about sixteen years old, and her tall undeveloped figure gave promise of much symmetry ; her features were small and regular, and her clear hazel eyes full of expression, but what most surprised the critical Londoner, accustomed to polished society, was her self-possession. Although quiet, her manner was neither constrained nor awkward.

"She is not conceited, thank Heaven," said Hallam to himself ; he felt almost piqued by her apparent indifference to the evidently unusual presence of a stranger.

A deeper thinker would, perhaps, have noted the firm-set jaw and chin which gave too much squareness to the lower part of the face, contradicting the delicate chiselling of the nose and lips, and would possibly have looked for more masculine defects than conceit ; not that I would imply conceit to be the sole inheritance of women : with far less excuse men are just as vain as they are, and it sits worse on them—it comes out more broadly, whereas a woman will clothe her infirmity in such a mantle of graceful nonsense that it often seems to add to her charms.

The dinner was meagre enough—a straggling raw-boned fowl, evidently a patriarch of the farm-yard, and a large piece of bacon, or rather of bacon fat, for lean was not visible, surrounded with greens, which gave out a strong unsavoury smell. However, the Londoner tried to make the best of it, and carved the greasy bacon as though it had been a choicer dish.

Miss Kirton only replied in monosyllables to his conversational attempts, and he began to think her face was the best part of her.

The old man noticed how carefully he was watching her.

"She has not had much schooling," he said, "but she can make butter, or pudding and pie, with the best o' 'em,"

"Very useful accomplishments," said Hallam, with an inward shudder.

Biz, who was in the act of pouring out a glass of ale for the visitor, nodded her head approvingly, but Hester coloured and it seemed more from annoyance than from shyness.

"Never mind about me, father; the gentleman wants to drink his ale."

Hallam started; she spoke broadly, almost with the accent of a peasant; he now remarked, what her very pretty face had prevented him from seeing before, that her hands, although small, were coarse and red, evidently from exposure. He noticed her gown, too; an ill-made, washed-out pink gingham, which she had grown too tall for, the waist being much too short, and some tucks had been "let out" in the skirt, as was apparent by the fresher colour about midway down. She scarcely spoke again except to answer her father about household matters; her voice was low and soft, but her manner in speaking was so singularly harsh and abrupt that Mr. Hallam was glad when she ceased, for either this, or the red hands or the pudding making, had dispelled his first illusion, and the ale, scarcely better than vinegar, completed his discomforture.

"You don't seem famous for road-making hereabouts," he said to Mr. Kirton.

"The roads are well enough—they're mostly wanted for carts and such like."

"They are not very favourable for shoe-leather. Don't you find that the stones knock out your boots terribly, Miss Kirton?"

"No, I don't," she said, shortly, without looking at him.

"I expect," said Kirton, with a smile, "that Hester's boots are more likely to knock the stones out than they are to knock out her boots; my girl wears clumpers, Mr. Hallam, none of your dandified Paris kids, as I see 'em called in the newspapers."

Hester reddened again and looked angrily at her father, but he went on without heeding her.

"You see we're poor homely folks, sir, and in clothes and such like we have to choose for wear and not for outside show, which I take it is what you mostly care for in London. You ain't much used to the country, I should say?"

"Except when I take a few weeks' shooting, I confess I don't

know much about it—but I've a great idea, Mr. Kirton, that I should take to farming immensely: I like anything practical."

"Oh, you do, do you?" said the farmer, looking hard at him. "If I may be so bold, what's your particular line of business now?"

Something in the old man's manner disconcerted Hallam; he seemed, behind his affected humility, to be indulging in a grim sneer at the Londoner, and to suspect his intentions, so that he answered with less than his usual self-possession.

"I am in the Colonial Office—a very good place, you know, as one is sure of getting on."

"Oh! that's it, is it?" said the old man. "You be one of them gentlemen as must wear good clothes, and keep respectable, and read the papers, and write a few letters, all at the country's expense; and I don't doubt now but what you think you work uncommon hard."

"I work as hard as a gentleman need work, I believe," said Hallam, nettled out of his indifference.

"Gentleman, indeed! Now look you here young man; no offence, but such a gentleman as you are, I take it, is uncommon like a butterfly as never does nothing to earn his own bread, it's all set ready for him. I'm a plain-spoken man, you see."

"Oh," said Hallam, laughing, for he was very good-tempered, "you only consider gentlemen worthy of the name who live on their own property, and derive their income from their own acres."

"Not exactly," said Kirton; "nothing can make a man a gentleman who is not born one; all the borrowed feathers in the world won't do that," he added, looking hard at Hallam. "He may rub against other gentlemen, and get some of their polish, but it comes off again, man, at a hard rub—it comes off. Even for a born gentleman, I take it, an idle life is the worst thing that can happen to him; but for one who's not quite sure what he is, work, sir, work, is the likeliest thing to happen him into what he wants."

Hallam gulped down these very distasteful observations and advice in the best way he could.

"You are a very keen observer," he said, "and have seen a good deal of life, I should think. By-the-by," he continued, for the seriousness oppressed him, "do you ever bring Miss Hester to London? I should be charmed to show you some of the sights when next you come up," he added, looking at her; but as he

said it, a vision of walking with that pink gingham gown in the streets of London, almost made him shudder.

"You are very good, sir—I may say too good—to people you never saw before; but we've friends of our own in London, poor and humble though we be, and should be loath to trouble strangers." This was said rather proudly. "Hester," he added, sharply, for she was sitting with her eyes now fixed intently on Hallam, "those chickens ought to be fed again."

Hester started; she rose without a word, and left the kitchen by a door which apparently led into the yard.

There was silence for a few minutes. Hallam wished she would return; he had been quite aware that she had been looking at him—poor little thing, it was but natural: of course she had never seen any one like him before. Yes, it was quite possible that a little judicious training might obviate the very harsh way in which she spoke, and other defects of her position.

The pause continued, and he became sensible that Mr. Kirton was waiting for him to speak.

"What do you do with yourself after dinner, Mr. Kirton?" he said, in a jovial, confidential manner, "do you smoke? If you have no objection, I should like to take a turn round your farm with you this afternoon."

"Very like you would," said the farmer drily; "but I ha' not got the time to spare, I'm afeard, and I don't smoke, and maybe you'll miss the next train to London if you don't look sharp." And then before Hallam could reply, "I'll go and get a lad to carry your trunk," and he was gone, leaving his guest with the conviction that he must yield his point. Biz, who was in the wash-house built out into the yard, already busy washing her dishes, came in, wiping her hands on her apron as soon as she heard her master leave the kitchen.

"Good-by, Biz, I'm going. I hope to see you again some day."

"Well, sir, and you'll be welcome to come for my part, if the muster's agreeable."

"Oh, yes, Biz; I feel sure Mr. Kirton will be always glad to see me. Perhaps you'll find me a bed next time I come."

Biz shook her head, and looked at him curiously.

"If I was you, sir, and I comed again, I'd put up at the 'Bells' down at Driven; it's a tidy little place enough."

"Ah, I'll see about that; but I say, Biz, I'd no notion your young lady was so pretty—I never expected to see so charming a girl in this old out-of-the-way place."

"Didn't you, though?" said Biz; "there now, and I believe muster thinks you've comed a purpose."

"O' purpose for what?" said Hallam, laughing to hide his consciousness.

"Why, to make love like to Muss Heaster. Didn't ye see how sharp he sent her to the chickens?"

"That's an excellent joke," said Hallam, "when I came down here to oblige Mr. Goldsmith. I grant you Miss Hester is quite pretty enough to tempt any one to come from London to see her, but then you see, Biz, I didn't know it."

"Well, to be sure," said Biz; "that's what I've telled muster about mewing her up so, over and over again, and he won't listen. He ought to let her go about a bit, and have better gownds, and a little pleasuring like others; the poor child's reg'lar moped. Whoy, I believe you be the first real gentleman as she's ever seed let alone spoke to."

"Really!" and Hallam was going to ask more questions, but Mr. Kirton's entrance, with the intelligence that a lad was at the front door ready to go with him to the station, interrupted any further talk. As Kirton turned to lead the way, Hallam hastily slid some money into Biz's hand, and after taking a courteous leave of his host, whom he found waiting for him in the entrance passage, he returned to the station, considerably mortified at not having been able to instal himself as a visitor at Kirton's Farm. Still he felt he had an ally in Biz, and he hoped a favourable impression had been made on Hester.

CHAPTER III.

FREDERIC HALLAM AND HIS LAWYER.

MR. GOLDSMITH was a lawyer of much good, and also of much evil, repute. So far as the good went, he had an unexceptionable, well-appointed house in Regent's Park, kept by his two maiden sisters—good, quiet, religious women; a perfect brougham, of the last new pattern, and some capital horses; his dinners and his wine were pronounced excellent by experienced judges; he had a small but choice collection of pictures by modern artists. His library was filled with curiosities and rarities he had collected in his continental trips; these took, in fact, the place of books

there. Mr. Goldsmith studied human nature more than books ; he subscribed largely to all the public charities ; his name was sure to be seen among those of the stewards at public dinners, and was frequent in committee lists and those of vice-patrons ; and last, not least by any means in this generation, his wealth was said to be unbounded. There were people who said that the Miss Goldsmiths did not dress plainly from religious scruples, but from necessity, and that it seemed hard, with all their brother's wealth, that they should have each but an allowance of twenty pounds a year, while the butler pocketed seventy. Also these evil-minded people said that the rich lawyer's morality was not so correct as he strove to make it appear ; but these were minor charges. Others said, the law was not such a profitable business as Mr. Goldsmith appeared to have found it, and that an office might be made useful for one kind of business as well as another ; at any rate the least that could be said was, that Goldsmith had a very lucky way of investing money.

He was a man with an immense circle of acquaintances and not one intimate friend, except the old farmer, Ralph Kirton. They had been schoolfellows : Kirton had remained country-bred, having by his excessive skill in farming and his parsimony scraped together a large fortune ; while his friend had become a polished Londoner, and at the same time a man of substance. It was wonderful that so keenly suspicious a nature as Kirton's should bring himself to trust his money with any one ; but old friendship, and the hope of increasing his hoards, had induced the farmer to let Goldsmith have the greater part of his wealth to invest.

The lawyer was just now sitting in his office, deep in thought or calculation ; perhaps he was not frowning enough for the latter. He was of middle height, broad and stout, and might have been called powerfully made about the shoulders, but for his excessive circumference below the waist, the effect of which he enhanced by wearing an erect shirt-frill, something like a white cockscomb ; there was a Jewish look in his face ; his eyes projected slightly ; but his most prominent feature was his sallow chin, which trebled itself before it reached his spotless white neckcloth.

The office was a quiet, homely place enough ; two sides of it were filled with rows of tin boxes, labelled with the names and initials of clients ; and in one corner was a huge iron safe, doubtless containing some extra valuable documents.

The other two sides were occupied by the fire-place, over which hung a map, and the large table, covered with papers and

parchments, at which he was sitting. There were two doors, one facing him, which led on to the staircase, for his office was on the first floor, his clerks occupying the lower story, and one close by the table leading to an inner sanctum; the window did not tempt a second glance, as it looked down into a sort of square well, formed by three whitewashed walls besides its own.

There was a smart tap at the door, and Mr. Hallam entered.

He seemed on friendly terms with the lawyer, for they shook hands, and the young man at once pulled a chair close to Mr. Goldsmith's and seated himself.

"First of all," he said, unbuttoning his coat, "I'll hand you over your confounded papers; a nice dance to lead a fellow broiling along a dusty road twice in a day; why, I thought at least I should get a bed and a few days' country air," and he pulled and petted his whiskers as if consoling them for their loss.

"Bless me!" Goldsmith affected extreme astonishment; "you don't mean to say you didn't sleep one night there! How very inhospitable! Well, I'm quite surprised; I really am."

"No! are you though?" and Hallam's brow cleared in an instant. "I confess I thought you knew how matters stood, and sent me down by way of hoaxing me."

"My dear sir!" and Goldsmith raised his hands deprecatingly.

"Well, never mind; what's done and ended can't be mended. Anyhow it was a horrid bore, and I bought a new portmanteau on purpose; and then as soon as we had dined—I say, Goldsmith, you wouldn't have liked the dinner, I can tell you—old Kirton told me I should be late for the train."

Goldsmith laughed till his yellow chin shook like a jelly; but he suddenly checked himself, for Hallam only joined faintly in his merriment, and asked whether he had seen Miss Kirton.

"Yes, by Jove! that made up a little. I forgot to tell you I accomplished that, and she's an uncommon pretty creature, quite a child though."

"She must be about eighteen or nineteen, I think."

"Well, she may be, it's hard to tell, and perhaps being kept shut up may make her seem younger; the servant, a queer old fish, told me she sees no one."

"Ah, is that it? I understand now the reason of my friend Kirton's inhospitality: he was afraid so very charming a gentleman might leave too deep an impression on the heart of his daughter."

"By Jove, I wish I could think so, but she's wonderfully self-

possessed, and seems as cold as a statue ; if you're her guardian, Goldsmith, you should see to her, she really wants seeing after ; why, she wears a gown like a charity girl."

"So much the better, if you have really serious thoughts about her ; the less attractive she is, the more chance for you to go in quickly and win. I gave you the opportunity of seeing her ; you said you must marry a fortune, and I think I may say hers will be something better than a common one, but as to Ralph Kirton ever consenting to such a thing as giving her a farthing till he dies, you may whistle for that, Master Fred."

"What's to be done, then ? Shall I run away with her ?"

Mr. Goldsmith again raised his hands and his eyes.

"To listen to you young men—well—well—well, and if you took so very rash and altogether improper a step in defiance of his wishes, have you not already seen enough of Ralph Kirton to be sure he would leave his money to a hospital or a charitable institution, in short, to any thing or body but his daughter ? Why, sir, his will's something like that poker, only far more unbending."

"Well, then, what do you advise me to do ?"

"Are you consulting me professionally ?"

"I don't care ; any how, so that I get an answer," said Hallam, laughing.

"Then I'll tell you something ; but, mind, don't you let this out to Captain Fortescue and half a dozen others."

"All right ; I can keep a secret when I choose."

"Very well ; it is to your own interest to keep this. My good old friend has a heart complaint, and, consequently, his life is a very bad one, although he steadily ignores the fact spite of warning attacks, and this is why I—of course feeling a deep interest in Hester—am anxious to provide her with a kind husband and a suitable home whenever she is left an orphan, and the only plan I could think of for compassing this end was that which I have adopted, namely, of letting you see her. You see I speak unreservedly, Mr. Hallam ; I must feel a deep interest in the poor child, and I hope I am not mistaken in supposing if you can gain her affection, that you will make her a good and considerate husband."

And having delivered this ingenuous explanation of his motives, Mr. Goldsmith flourished his cambric handkerchief, redolent of the very best eau-de-Cologne—he never used fashionable scents in business hours, it was unprofessional.

Hallam looked hard at him, but his face was hidden by his

handkerchief; probably the youth was of a sceptical turn of mind, for he seemed inclined to laugh at Mr. Goldsmith's tender interest in Hester's future. Or he might, indeed, have had some good reason for his disbelief.

"Then am I to understand that I have to go on waiting and waiting till Mr. Kirton chooses to die and leave his daughter free to marry?"

The lawyer nodded.

"And how, my good sir, am I to make sure in the meantime that some one does not quietly step in and carry off the prize?"

"Trust that to me. Kirton has so much dread, and justly, of the effect of excitement, that he, as you heard, never admits any visitors, certainly no strangers. I wish I could say I thought you had long to wait, for I love and respect my old friend very much, very much indeed; so set your mind at rest, and leave it all to me."

Mr. Hallam saw that his visit was considered ended, and he rose to go away; but as he reached the door which the lawyer held open for him, a new thought seemed to strike him.

"I say, Goldsmith, of course I don't mean to doubt you, but looking at it purely in the light of business, I've no assurance that you'll keep your memory fresh in this matter."

"My dear friend—ha! ha! ha!—good, good—you young men have wonderful old heads on your shoulders, I declare. Let me see: what assurance can I give you? I tell you what, if I don't keep faith with you in this matter you may strike one out of the three thousand pounds you owe me."

"Will you write it?"

"By all means, if you wish."

And so the promise was written, signed, and duly stowed away in Frederic Hallam's pocket-book among various other small documents which, probably, he would have been as unwilling to submit to public inspection as this one. People would have wondered more even than they did at his uniformly sunny temper and gay light-heartedness, if they could have known in how serious and threatening a shape he carried the black witch, money-worry, next his heart in that pocket-book; of course, had his debts been inevitable, one must have admired the hopeful spirit with which he bore them. But they were not; they were the result of self-indulgent extravagance and of that fatal pastime which prevents many a young man from marrying now-a-days—a betting-book.

His father, a fashionable London barrister, was the son of

parents who had worked their way up to wealth from "the ranks," and when they had spent a small fortune on making their son a gentleman, were mortified to find that he never asked them to his fine West End house from their quiet retreat in the Mile End Road, to meet his grand friends.

This was probably to be attributed to his wife's influence, for he was a dutiful, affectionate son before his marriage; but young Mrs. Hallam, who also sprang from a *parvenu* race, was determined to obliterate every trace of such misfortunes, both on her husband's side and her own.

And in her case it seemed easy: she came from a distant county, but therefore suffered from the double disadvantage of provincial narrow-mindedness and that restless assumption and self-assertion which seems to beset some people when they or their families have risen in position; possibly they cannot help it: like people of undecided minds settling in a new house, they take a long time to get used to it and cannot let things take their course and shake down easily.

However it might have been, young Mrs. Hallam "gave herself airs." Perhaps if she had only known how fast news travels in these days, she might have been more cautious, and instead of talking of her father as a landed gentleman, who lived on his property, she might have remembered who and what was her grandfather, and, indeed, the early beginning of the very landed gentleman himself. But what she did for herself was surpassed by the efforts of her sister-in-law, who (in far too much terror of her brother to tell any stories about her own family, for, although Frederic Hallam the elder gave way to his wife, he always gloried in the fact that he owed everything to his father and mother) trumpeted forth the riches and grandeur and position of Mrs. Hallam's young family and relatives, till she established them in the minds of her friends as well-born old county people, and as no one could be so rude as to tell her the truth and that she was deceiving herself, she remained for many years in comfortable and self-complacent ignorance.

It was not surprising that with so silly a mother and aunt, the Frederic Hallam of this story grew up a spoiled, only child. Hitherto they had not spoiled his sweet temper, but they had injured his principles. He was sent early to Eton, and before he was fourteen had made himself so notorious by his scrapes and extravagances, that Mr. Hallam was quietly advised to remove his son, and to place him with a private tutor. Thence he went to

Cambridge—where, although not vicious, in the worst sense of the word, he was distinguished for idleness and his love of expensive pleasures—he could not indulge in anything moderately. Where another man would have been contented with one horse, Frederic Hallam kept two ; his rooms were among the most elegantly furnished in the university ; he appeared to have no just idea of the value of money, or of the length of his father's purse. For some little time, his mother and his aunt supplied the deficiency in his allowance from their own private means ; but this could not last, and he was obliged to refer his creditors to his father.

Mr. Hallam was very angry, and justly so ; he had given his son an income beyond what his actual means warranted. He paid Frederic's bills, telling him at the same time that he should alter his will, leaving him only a small yearly allowance, sufficient to maintain him till he had launched himself in a profession, and settling the remainder of his property partly on his wife, but so tightly that she could not transfer any of it to Frederic until her death, when it would all fall to him ; the rest was left in trust till his son should be twenty-eight years of age.

Mr. Hallam's object in making this change was to force his son to give up idle spendthrift habits, and if he had seen him changed, doubtless he would have again altered his will ; but he died so soon and so suddenly, that it remained in force, and about two years afterwards Frederic, who, on quitting Cambridge, had spent a long while on the Continent, found himself compelled to earn his own livelihood, for his mother, though still indulgent, had just begun to find out that her darling was " quite too extravagant," and he had so wounded his aunt Martha by his neglect that her presents came more and more sparingly.

A year before the beginning of this story he had obtained a government clerkship, and his prepossessing face and manners had already gained him favour in his office, although even here his butterfly, pleasure-seeking spirit had been commented on more than he would have thought possible among " the dons," as he called the heads.

A friend of his, Captain Fortescue, had introduced him to Mr. Goldsmith as a very kind, judicious person, capable of giving good advice in money matters. Hallam, however, found that when he had explained his position and expectations, this gentleman was far more liberal with his money than his advice, and he had launched out again into greater extravagance than ever ; but

a few weeks back a "little mem. of account," for which he had been advised by Fortescue to ask, had sobered him, and made him think seriously of his future. Unless he meant quite to destroy his property before it came to him, he must try a fresh course; he knew that it would take time—years, probably—to rise to a good position in his office; increase of salary there was a far-off idea, and Frederic Hallam was essentially a present day man, all for speed and hurry, and ready money means and ways.

He thought he would go to Goldsmith and try for once to get advice out of him instead of money.

To his surprise the lawyer gave it willingly, and Frederic's visit to Kirton's Farm has shown us with what result. He was bent now on marrying for money; that was the last new idea; it seemed to offer an escape from his difficulties, and, therefore, one to be made much of; on the happiness or misery it might bring he never bestowed a thought, and if he had, he would have told himself that he was always happy, and, therefore, any one ought to be happy with him. For several reasons he determined not to mention the matter to his mother. If he married Hester he intended to take her abroad, and polish and educate her before he introduced her to any one. He meant to leave office on his marriage and go abroad without giving any notice of his intentions, and then it would be quite time enough to settle the next move; he was not going to worry himself about it now; on one thing he had resolved during his last interview with Mr. Goldsmith—to be free of that gentleman as soon as possible after his marriage, for he somehow seemed to feel that so long as he had recourse to him so long would his pocket-book remain full of painful little reminders.

CHAPTER IV.

PAY-DAY AT KIRTON'S FARM.

It was a fine warm Saturday evening at Kirton's Farm. Hester had just come into the hall and put one of the oak settles ready for her father; she then dragged out of the parlour a small three-legged table, and set it in front of the stool; one might have wondered, as this was a regular Saturday performance, why the table was not left in the hall instead of being always carried back

to the parlour. If you had asked Hester, she would have said, "It had always been so," or else, perhaps, that she did not choose a good table to be left in that damp desolate hall, never used except on Saturday, when the men came in to receive their wages. She pulled open the door of a curious little cupboard in the wall by the side of the fire-place, and took thence three wooden bowls, which she placed on the table, and then stood beside it, looking towards the door at which she expected her father to enter.

He did not keep her waiting long. As the Dutch clock in the kitchen struck the appointed hour, his creaking, almost stealthy step was heard coming along the stone passage. He had three canvas bags in his hands, which he placed on the round table, and then seating himself he took from under his arm two large account-books, and an ink-bottle from his pocket, drew a pen from behind his ear, and handed it with one of the books to Hester.

Not a word passed. The girl, standing beside him, still wearing the obnoxious pink gingham, took the pen and book silently, opened it, and was ready to begin.

One of the hall windows was in reality a glass door, generally closely fastened, but now on the latch. In a few moments it opened, and a young lad about sixteen appeared.

He gave a kind of scrape, and then came up to the table.

"How many days, Matthew?"

"Full time, sir."

The farmer looked up at him sharply.

"It can't be full time—why, your mother died on Tuesday. You don't mean that you went on working all the same?"

"Ees, I did. It bean't my fault, sir; I hadn't enough to bury her, and I didn't choose to ax ye to gee a day's wage, sir."

"Of course not," said the farmer; "that would never have done, Matthew, you know. I couldn't have afforded it. Put down six days, Hester, against Matthew White," he said, when he had consulted the book before him.

Hester looked pitifully at the uncouth boy, as, after having received his money (Mr. Kirton had emptied his bags into the bowls), he slowly retreated; but she was not thinking it hard that he had been obliged to work at such a time, she only sympathized with him because he was motherless.

The next who advanced was a red-headed Irishman, who seemed incapable of standing still; he made several bows, and

then stood squeezing his hat, balancing first on one leg and then on the other, relieving the monotony of this by vehemently scratching his head.

His time only came to four days and a half.

Mr. Kirton, after looking at his book, asked sternly how it was that he never worked full time, when he had a wife and young children to keep.

The Irishman scratched his head harder than ever.

"Plase yer honour, that's jist the raison why I'm not full time."

"And how may that be?"

Alick was almost the only labourer who would have ventured on a joke with his master.

"Bekase I stays at home to keep the childer. Why, yer honour, when Ailsie's at the washtub, sure, it's not one or two of the childer that would fall in the fire, but de whole half dozen. They'd be roasted to crackling be time I left work."

"Well, well," said Mr. Kirton, who did not believe a word of Alick's excuse, "four days and a half, Hester, and listen, Alick, I'm going to look at your piece of work to-morrow, and I hope I'll find it better than the last."

"All right, yer honour, and be jacies ye'd best lose no time, or maybe the wheat 'll be up and growing; sure I'm not the boy to let grass grow under me heels, and that yer honour knows."

"Well, go your way," said Mr. Kirton, as he turned to the next comer, a sallow, sickly-looking man, who walked in very slowly.

"How are you, Peter?" said Hester. The man was a favourite of hers; he suffered much, and bore it without complaint.

"About same as usual, muss," he said, smiling.

"How many days?" said Mr. Kirton, coldly; he always steeled his heart against illness, there seemed a danger of his being called on for charity. He had no objection to let Hester and Biz give away gruel, but he was annoyed that Peter Stasson's pale face should have been commented on before him, and became perfectly blind to it immediately.

"Five days, sir."

Mr. Kirton knew that only severe pain would have made Peter give up a day's work; but he took no notice, and bade Hester put down five days against Peter Stasson.

Hester betrayed no sign of feeling; she waited till all the men

had been paid and dismissed—till she had replaced the bowls, which Kirton had carefully emptied into his canvas bags, in their hiding-place, and the table in the parlour; and then she joined the farmer in the yard.

"Father," she said, in a voice as stern and harsh as his own, "you're too hard on that man; you know Peter 'll work till he drops down dead; he must, or his children will starve. You ought to give him a rest."

"Hold your tongue, child, and don't be a fool. How can I give him rest? do you suppose I can afford to pay him for work he don't do?"

"Yes, I believe you can." She spoke without any excitement or feeling, but in a determined tone far beyond her age.

"Well, then, you believe wrong," said the farmer, avoiding her steady look. "Don't be as foolish, child, as the rest, and go for to think I'm a rich man,"—he lowered his voice, and looked cautiously round;—"maybe you'll find out your mistake when I die."

He walked away from her to the gate of the pig-yard, where he stood thinking for a few minutes.

Hester remained where he had left her, thinking, too, apparently. She had a strange expression in her eyes sometimes, for one so young; they were beautiful, dark brown in colour, but looked smaller than they were from their long shape; they could not be called cunning, and yet they were sharply intelligent, but not restlessly so; there was a repose in their acuteness which suggested the idea of penetration, rather than cunning.

It is a curious fact, but an almost universal one, that people with small, even moderate-sized eyes, are far more observing with regard to others, more reticent about themselves, than those whose eyes are large and prominent. If the size and form of the eyeball be, according to phrenologists, a sign of the gift of language, it certainly regulates the use of it; for large-eyed people are almost always great talkers, and we know that those who speak the least are supposed to reflect the most.

She raised her head slightly, as though dismissing an unprofitable subject, and then, as if determined to broach a fresh one, went across the yard to her father.

"Father, what did that stranger gentleman want here on Wednesday?"

The farmer looked keenly at her for several moments without answering.

"Ah! you be like all the rest of the women, then, Hester, as full of curiosity as bacon's full of salt; some of 'em wouldn't ha' bided three days before they asked questions, though. Well, child, he came to see me. You didn't think it was to see you, did you?"

"N—no," Hester hesitated, and felt almost as if she had told a falsehood; Biz had been so positive that the young man's visit was to her, that she had begun to believe it.

Her father noticed her manner.

"I was only making a joke, child; a London gentleman like that don't come down miles to look at a farmer's daughter, unless he means some harm; which I take it no one would dare to Ralph Kirton. He came on business, I tell ye." He spoke very harshly, for her colour had deepened, and, without exactly knowing why, he felt he must be angry with some one.

But Hester was not to be put off so easily.

"You said last Midsummer day, father, that I was to begin and help you pay the men, and know about business; now if this gentleman came down on business, why mayn't I know what it is about?"

Mr. Kirton was neither choleric nor impatient; he almost always waited to hear what people had got to say, and thought a little before he answered; he did so now.

"Well, child, I see you're growing a clever woman, and you shall learn business when your head is clear enough to manage it; but ye must walk before ye run. This Mr. Hallam came down here as a clerk from Mr. Goldsmith, my friend in London, to get my signature to some papers."

"Then he is Mr. Goldsmith's clerk?" she fixed her eyes on him with a strangely incredulous look.

Ralph Kirton wished she had not asked the question, but he did not choose to tell her a direct falsehood.

"You heard him say at dinner-time that he was a government clerk."

"And what is that, father?"

"Something of the same kind as the other—but never mind more of him now; come along and look at the brown calf, she's going away on Monday for good."

A long talk ensued about the feeding of calves, &c., subjects on which Hester could discourse far more fluently than on any others. Mr. Kirton seldom talked much at a time to his daughter, but he knew quite enough about her to feel that Hallam was not

a safe topic and that to show openly that he thought so would be the sure way to set her brooding over it. He felt it was natural that she should ask questions about this the first man above a servant, of her own age, she had ever seen under her father's roof, and especially so good-looking a one. How could Goldsmith be so thoughtless to send such a person, when he knew his great anxiety to keep her a child, free from any ideas about dress or nonsense? However, it was done, and the less she was encouraged to think about it the better, and he led her off to talk on her favourite topics, and praised her far more than usual for the success of her last broods of chickens, for in poultry rearing and butter and cheese-making, Hester was, and felt herself, equal to any experienced farmer's wife or daughter. In all she did she was essentially clever and thorough; she had had but two years' schooling at an obscure watering-place where only farmers' daughters were received, and although she was not allowed to learn anything but English and needlework, her talents showed themselves and were appreciated by her teachers; but her father took her away at fourteen, for fear she should gain a taste for fine clothes and any ideas about love and marriage.

Probably if he had been asked about Hester's future he would not have found a ready answer: he hid her away from others just as he did his money—from pure love of hoarding; doubtless he never questioned himself as to what a lone ignorant woman would do with the great wealth he would leave her; but he despised education, and thought natural talents best left without it; he had not felt the want of it, and why should Hester? He forgot that times had altered since his youth—that in a country intersected with railways it would be impossible to live in the solitude and retirement in which his own early manhood had been passed. He shut his mental sight obstinately to any reasoning which seemed to threaten expense—to educate Hester and give her fine clothes must cost money, and he determined that she did not want that which he was resolved not to give. He loved his daughter, but it was after a fashion of his own.

CHAPTER V.

LUCY WRENSHAW.

HESTER's uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw, spite of their dislike to Kirton, had remonstrated with him seriously when he took the girl from school, and had urged that she should be sent to one of a superior class near London, where her cousin Lucy was being educated. Mrs. Kirton, Mr. Wrenshaw and Frank Wrenshaw, had been brothers and sisters, but Mrs. Kirton and Frank had both died young, when their children were babies, and Lucy was left to the care of a not very wise mother; however, she had this wisdom, that she listened to advice, and, spite of her reluctance to part with her spoiled darling, sent Lucy to school at twelve years old. She was now just eighteen, the same age as Hester, and had left school about six months. She was the only permitted visitor at Kirton's Farm, her home being in the next market town.

At first, when the farmer found her visits were becoming periodical, he looked black, and gave Lucy to understand that her cousin had no time for visits and gossip; but that damsel had a way of not being put off when she had set her mind on anything, and she carried her point, and appeared at the farm whenever she pleased.

There was only morning service at the little church at Driven, for two small hamlets were served by the same curate, and Hester was sitting listlessly in the parlour—they only used it on Sundays—wondering what could make her feel so dull and do nothing, when her name, shouted in a clear merry voice at the front gate, made her start, and look out of the window.

"Hallow, Hester! where on earth are you? I wanted you to hold the pony, child. Why, he wouldn't stand a minute; Joe's at his head now." And Lucy Wrenshaw, flying over the stony path that had destroyed Hallam's boots, very hot and flushed with her exertions, pushed open the parlour door, and came in without any ceremony.

She was as perfect a contrast to Hester as can be imagined—short and plump, with dark eyes and hair, a little impertinent nose, and a flexible, expressive mouth; she looked as full of feeling and impulse as her cousin did of calm determination.

And the difference between them was as great as it appeared. Spite of Lucy's superior education and her fashionable style of

dress, she really stood in awe of her cousin, although she often indulged in boasting of her own advantages and pitying Hester's lot, and on her return home she would tell her mother "how much good she had done that dear old dowdy of a Hester. What a pity such a pretty girl should be so disfigured!"

For Lucy was generous; she knew and frankly owned that Hester was much better looking than she was. Poor Lucy! how she longed to be tall and beautiful! She was not an admirer of her own style of beauty, for she had beauty, although it depended chiefly on expression, a pair of remarkable eyes, a fresh clear skin.

Hester was not yet aware of the influence she possessed over her cousin; she had not seen much of her, as Lucy had been so long at school, and now Hester was too much dazed with her fine clothes and conversation to feel her equal, much less her superior.

"Where's the governor, Hester?"

"In the rick-yard; he won't be in till tea-time; but won't you come in the kitchen and speak to Biz?"

"Not I—I'm heaps too tired for that, and besides, Hester,"—she tossed her hat on the nearest chair—"I've got something important to tell you."

"What, a secret?"

Hester's eyes grew eager, though her manner was calm; curiosity was a strong, or rather weak, point in her nature, as it is so often in those who are unusually exempt from moral weakness.

"Yes; now, what will you give me for it?"

"Nonsense, Lucy, you tell me at once. I've nothing to give; what is it?" said her cousin with assumed indifference.

"What a creature you are, Hester! I believe sometimes you're a stone; why couldn't you put your arms round my neck now and give me a kiss? I never knew anything like you; I know when you have a husband you'll only kiss him once a week."

"Perhaps not so often," said her cousin, smiling; "but now, Lucy, I will know this secret without more talk. I believe it's only about a new frock."

"Oh, I daresay," and Lucy tossed her head with the air of a scornful beauty. "I've a great mind not to tell you, Hester, only, perhaps, you'll burst if I don't. What do you think of *my* having a lover?"

"What! are you going to be married already, Lucy? I'm sure you're a great deal too young."

"Now, Hester, don't preach; I never saw anything like you, you get the news out of one, and then you don't look the least bit

surprised or glad, but begin and preach; there are plenty of parsons to preach without your having a share. Come now, what do you think? in the first place," she added, softening down, for her exuberance was really half nervous, "don't you think it wonderful I should have a lover at all so soon?"

"I hadn't thought about it," said Hester; "but I don't know why it should be wonderful."

"Well, perhaps not;" Lucy was half sorry she had so nearly betrayed her want of self-confidence; "only it's very nice— isn't it?"

"Is it? what is the niceness? does he give you any presents?"

"Yes, he does; but, oh! you mercenary girl, to think of such a thing first of all? But what I think nice is he sits and looks at me, and then opens his mouth and sighs, and shows me bits of poetry in books, about eyes, which shows he must think mine worth looking at, and I thought—" and then Lucy stopped again.

"But, instead of telling me all this, which I should think must be very stupid, can't you tell me his name, Lucy, and what he's like?"

"He has rather an ugly name—Jacob Bonham. You've heard of him, haven't you, the young doctor? And do you know, Hester, I always thought I should like to marry an Alphonso; Alphonso Wilfrid Fitzgerald was the name I should have chosen if I could have had a husband christened on purpose."

"Lucy!" and Hester's scorn made her cousin laugh, though she winced under it.

"Well, I don't care, I do like pretty names; at any rate, he is tall, and he has beautiful blue eyes and nice fair hair."

"What sort of a nose, as you seem to be taking an inventory of him?"

"Oh, I don't remember about his nose; I think it is like anybody else's; his mouth is pretty when it's shut, but somehow his teeth are ugly when he opens it."

"Ah!" exclaimed Hester, almost warmly; "Lucy, you could never marry a man with ugly teeth? I couldn't."

"Dear me, Hester," Lucy bridled up now, "I didn't know you thought of marrying, and who said, pray, I was going to have Jacob Bonham for a husband? He walks home from church with mother and me, and he may have called a few times to see us, and given me a few trifles, but I suppose a gentleman may pay me attention without my caring very much for him; but I'm not going to be cross, poor dear, when I come to see you," for Hester

had turned away at her first words. "I've told you my news ; I'm such a selfish wretch I always talk about myself first : now tell me yours," and she went up to her cousin, who was standing in the window-seat, and put her arm round her.

Hester did not care for demonstrative affection, she was quite unused to it, but she was too glad to see Lucy to be unkind to her, so she stood quite still and submitted to be kissed.

"There's no news ever here, Lucy, you know that well enough ; I've nothing to tell except that Peter Stasson's worse, and I fear he will soon die."

"Ah, how very sad ! and then what will his poor wife do without him ?"

"I don't know. I was thinking what will his poor children do without him, and how will his wife manage to feed them ? But come and see the brown calf ; she is going away to-morrow, she was going last Monday."

"Very well, only let's go round by the front way, then ; if we go kitchen way, and Biz begins to talk to me, I know she'll keep me there half an hour. But, Hester, I don't think you looked at my new dress ; isn't it a love of a muslin ?"

"Yes, it is very pretty ; but isn't it a very gay colour, Lucy ?"

"My dear, that's all you know about it. Why, it is the very height of the fashion ; I forget what its name is. I bought it because Jacob said he thought the colour was invented for dark-eyed beauties ; he thinks it sweetly pretty."

"You've creased it sadly," said Hester.

"Oh, that's nothing ; it is so stiff that it will stand several ironings before it goes to wash. And how do you like my cloak ?"

"I do like that," said her cousin, with a half sigh, "much better than I do your dress ; it'll wear well no doubt."

"Ah, you see, dear, if you knew a little more about the fashions you would find it quite impossible to get along without a something of this colour—either a dress, or a bonnet, or something ; but you are saved a good deal of trouble in every way by your quiet life."

Hester turned away impatiently.

"Are uncle and aunt Wrenshaw coming to see you this year ?" she asked, as she stooped to unfasten the door of the calf's house.

"Not that I know of. Oh, stop ! mamma said something about it yesterday. Why don't you ask them here ? Aunt Wrenshaw has been ill all the spring ; a little country air would do her good, and she is your godmother too, Hester."

"I was quite a little girl when I saw her last. I wonder if she would know me."

"I can tell you one thing: you must make uncle give you a new frock before she comes—she's so particular about dress; and oh, what a pity you've no piano, and it is such a treat to hear aunt Wrenshaw play; she and I play duets together."

"Do look at the calf; isn't he a beauty?" said Hester, fondling the creature's head.

"Well, I suppose he is; but you know I'm not a connoisseur in stock. I don't mean to marry a farmer, so there's no use in knowing. But do you really mean, Hester, that nothing has happened since I was here last, except Peter's illness?"

"Yes, I forgot at first, and I remembered it while you were talking—a gentleman came," and Hester's cheeks and forehead became crimson, but she was fastening the door again, and Lucy did not see. She looked very pretty and graceful bending down, her fair skin admirably relieved against the dark, pitched boards. As Lucy looked at her she heaved a deep sigh at the thought of her own rather short, round figure.

"A gentleman!" she exclaimed, "and you never told me all this time. Young or old? come, Hester, I must know all about it."

"Young and handsome," her cousin said, quickly; "but, if you want to hear about him, you should ask Biz—I believe she is in love with him herself."

The old woman had gradually approached them as they stood looking at the calf.

"Well, Muss Lucy, and so ye've got never a word for I."

"A hundred if you like." There was decided animosity between these two. In her heart, Biz would have liked to see her young mistress as smart as Miss Wrenshaw; but, as it was, she always endeavoured to mortify the latter's vanity as much as possible. "But, Biz, how about this gentleman who's been to see you?"

"Bin to see I, indeed—to see Muss Hester, you means, muss. Ah, he's a real gentleman and no mistake: you should see his boots, Muss Lucy, and his hat, and the beautiful little thing he had for his whiskers."

"And is he very handsome, Biz?"

"Handsome! that ain't half a word for him. You needn't try to fancy what he's like, Muss, because you couldn't, never having seen any one of the sort before."

“How do you know that, Biz? I see heaps of handsome men.”

Lucy generally contradicted Biz, although she rarely quarrelled with Hester's opinions, not that she always agreed with her cousin, but she spoke in that firm, almost rude, manner which can scarcely be differed from without involving a dispute, and Lucy had gained at least this advantage from her superior education and position, that she knew sometimes how to economize her opinion—an article in which Hester, like most practical, strong-minded women, was very unthrifty, and, as many of their disagreements arose from their differing modes of life, Lucy felt that to take any advantage from her real superiority would be ungenerous, and so she often held her tongue and let Hester say things she knew to be unfounded for the sake of peace. Kirton's riches were pretty well guessed at, spite of his efforts to conceal the fact, and of course it followed that Hester would be rich some day; but Lucy knew that no money could ever replace the time that had been lost in her cousin's education; but, as I have said, although she would not wound Hester, she did not choose Biz to be wanting in deference to her superiority.

“Maybe so, Muss, but he's the top o' the heap. See here, Muss Lucy, I'll tell ye a secret.” Biz dropped her voice as Hester walked away from them into the kitchen. “You can't think how he's mad in love for muss there.” She nodded her head towards the door.

Lucy's heart beat fast; it would be too absurd for her poor, shut-up cousin to have an admirer more of a gentleman and better looking than Jacob.

“What is he, Biz? is he, he can't be, an independent gentleman?”

“All I know, Muss, is, his ideers is independent enough; I heerd un say he wur a member of Government, so I takes it he be one of the Lords and Commons.”

“How can you talk such nonsense, Biz? you must have made some absurd mistake.”

“I've made no mistakes, Muss. Perhaps you be a-thinking,” she continued, with a knowing smile, fixing her sharp black eyes on Miss Wrenshaw, whose discomfiture she perfectly understood and enjoyed—servants understand human nature better than their masters do—“that the gentleman he have made a mistake, in not waiting till *you* comed over?”

“I wasn't thinking anything of the sort, and you are extremely pert, Biz. You get spoiled by such familiar intercourse with your

master and mistress. You had better get tea ready, I think; Miss Kirton said she wanted it."

And talking till the last minute to cover her retreat, Lucy flounced through the kitchen, and joined her cousin.

She knew any complaint of Biz to Hester was worse than useless, and would only provoke a haughty defence of her old favourite, so she contented herself with prosecuting her inquiries about the "gentleman" till Mr. Kirton came in to tea, and as he insisted that her mother would be anxious to see her home early, she took her departure soon after, feeling somehow, as she drove along the dusty high road, as if she did not wish for Jacob Bonham beside her nearly so much as she had done in the morning.

CHAPTER VI.

A WARNING.

"FATHER, I want to speak with you."

"Well, speak away then," said Kirton, roughly, as he rose from breakfast, "and don't be long over it. I'm off to the Croft meadows, and shan't be home before tea-time."

"Then I'll come with you now, and talk as we go along," and before he could answer she had gone into the long stone passage, taken down her hat and cloak, and stood ready equipped for a walk.

Her father looked at her inquisitively; she was pale, and her lips were set firmly as if she had made up her mind to carry out some purpose; but Biz was in the kitchen, and Kirton, who, rather from caution than refinement, never spoke to Hester on private matters before her, walked out into the yard without giving either permission or denial to his daughter's request.

He led the way through the rick-yard, where he stopped and gave a few orders, then turning out of it to the right strode down a white stony road, full of hardened cartruts, and with a kind of low wall on each side, made of large pieces of stone piled loosely together: the perfect straightness and flatness of the road added to its dull, tedious appearance; even on in front there were no trees to break the straight line of the horizon—so far as eye could reach there were only vast fields separated from one another by these same piled-up stones.

Hester walked along silently ; at last either her father's curiosity was too urgent, or his patience proved less enduring than her own.

" Well, my lass, I thought ye were all for talk, and had something more than common to tell to me."

" And so I have, father," she burst forth, her colour rising and her eyes brightening, as the excited words came pouring from her lips ; " it's a shame, and a heavy shame, that I should be as I am."

Ralph Kirton stood suddenly still, like one petrified, then, with an action which had become usual with him of late when disturbed by any emotion—but of the significance of which his child was quite unconscious—he pressed his hand quietly on his heart. Hester went on rapidly.

" There is no use in saying you are a poor man, father, and yet you make me live as if you were. Look at my clothes ; but there are things I mind more than clothes. I don't know how to do anything like a lady. I can read, but what have I to read ? I can write, but I don't know how to write a letter. Even the pretty needlework that other girls can do, I can't do. I often wish I was dead," she continued, violently. " I'm little better than an animal."

She did not burst out crying as most girls would have done, exhausted by the indulgence of her passion. Hester was not nearly exhausted ; she stood there facing him, her hands tightly pressed together, feeling that by the sheer strength of her will she could have removed a mountain had it stood in her way.

" Are you mad, child ? What d'ye mean ? " said the farmer, angrily. " I've half a mind to shake you into your right senses."

" I'm not mad,"—she went on walking again, and he found himself compelled to follow her,—“ and I mean what I say. I'll not cast up what's gone by at you ; but I want to be sent to school for two years—to a school fit for me to go to."

The ground seemed to shake under Kirton's feet as he walked along : for some time past he had seen that Hester had become more silent and unsocial than usual ; but he had been glad of this, it left him more leisure to pursue his own favourite meditations ; but now it struck him that this must be Lucy's work, and he hastened to vent his wrath on her with the relief men usually experience when they can shift blame on any one else.

" It's that conceited little fool of a cousin of yours that's put

this nonsense in your head. Why, Hester, I'm ashamed of you ; I thought you'd more sense. So you wish to be like her, do you ? " he continued, with a sneer. " A lady indeed ! a little vain minx decked out in peacock's feathers—a parrot, who chatters as much nonsense as words ! Go along ; I'm downright ashamed of my own flesh and blood."

He had annoyed Hester, but he had not stopped her.

"It has nothing to do with Lucy, father ; she has never advised me to go to school : but go I must. Father, this is the first time I have ever asked you to do anything for me ; you cannot refuse me."

Angry as Kirton was, his habitual caution made him control himself.

"Well, well, child, you can't expect me to give a sudden answer to a thing like this, and I don't think, after the free life you've led here, you'd maybe relish the tight hand a governess 'ud keep on you, and the way those less than yourself 'ud laugh at such a big girl coming to school !"

Hester had thought about this last objection, and it seemed more formidable now when urged by another voice.

"At least will you do this, father—will you think about it, and will you invite uncle and aunt Wrenshaw to stay here a few days, and take their advice about it ? Perhaps aunt could put me in some way of learning by myself ; that would not cost much."

But this was almost as unwelcome a proposal as the first : visitors at Kirton's Farm, and, above all, people who managed, spite of their small means, to be perfectly independent of him, and to enjoy life withal—the idea made him tremble as much as if he had found some one trying the lock of his study door.

"Impossible, child ! What do I want with Robert Wrenshaw ? I don't like him to begin with ; and he's a spendthrift, who'll come to ruin before he dies, or else leave his wife to starve."

"She'll never starve as long as I live ; she's my godmother."

"And a precious deal of good that's ever done you. Now, Hester," he added, sternly, "I've been patient with you—don't you go and drive me into such a passion as 'ull make me say what I'd be sorry for."

"I'll only say this, father, and then I've done—I don't want you to think me undutiful neither—but you know I do my duty by you in the way of dairy-work and the rest ; all I ask you is to do the same by me, and let me have a little change, and be more

like other girls. I can't go on as I am. If you'll have the Wrenshaws and hear what they say, I'll not be obstinate about the school; but you know what I am, father, when I make up my mind: don't drive me foolish."

And without another word she left him, and walked quickly towards home with a feeling of lightness at her heart that she had not been used to lately.

Ralph Kirton was thoroughly perplexed and uncomfortable. He might and he did say, "Plague take the child! what tantrums be she in now?" But though he was in doubt how to act, he was far too much like Hester in disposition to have any doubt as to what her conduct would be if he gave her a decided refusal: there would be downright open mutiny, and how to quell it at Hester's age he could not determine; he knew very well she would live on bread and water for a year sooner than give in, and, meantime, the dairy and the poultry would go to ruin. Plan after plan was considered, and, at last, he resolved on writing to Mr. Goldsmith and asking his advice on the subject; he had named him Hester's sole guardian, and, therefore, he had a right to consult him about her. What puzzled Kirton more than anything was that so silly and inferior a girl, as he deemed Lucy, should have power to influence Hester, for he still believed it was her silly talk; but he shrugged his shoulders and supposed it was the fine clothes.

"It's the vanity," he muttered; "they're all alike, the best o' 'em; I suppose it's in their skin, and they can't help it."

All the time he spent at the Croft Meadow, and during his ride home—for he sent one of the men to fetch his pony—he felt the uncomfortable presentiment of coming evil: in some way or other money was going to be taken from his hoards; it was as if he had been menaced with the loss of a limb, and by the time he reached the farm he could almost have gone on his knees to Hester to beseech her compassion and forbearance; but one glance at her cold and now pale face when he met her in the kitchen, told him appeal was worse than useless; the only way of making terms with her was by maintaining as hard and resolute a demeanour as her own, until he had made up his mind what to do.

She did not open her lips on the subject, but went to bed early, only nodding her usual good-night to her father and Biz even more carelessly than usual; kisses were rare at Kirton's Farm, except when Lucy Wrenshaw paid a visit there.

The old servant, always sharp to notice any change of manner, now looked at her master. He was leaning his face on his hand, as if to shade it from the firelight; for the moment supper was over, the candle had been carefully extinguished.

"Ha' you and Muss Heaster been having words to-day, sir?" She always spoke cautiously and in a subdued voice to Kirton, he had taught her to fear him.

"Maybe we have and maybe not. Are you taking to be curious in your old age?"

"No, sir, I hopes not; but, muss, her haven't spoke a word scarce since her come home, 'cept once, when her asked how long it would take to air that best bedroom, and do it up fit to sleep in."

The farmer muttered something indistinguishable, then he added, louder, "I thought you had more sense, Biz, than to be wasting your wonders over girls' fancies; you'd better be minding your business, and not keeping up a fire till this time o' night."

"I didn't think, sir, after living with ye a-going on for thirteen year, I should be grudged a drop of hot water, which I'm pettiklar in want of to-night, no, that I didn't. Heigho! time was when I might ha' had my own kittle to bile; but ere-a-mussy me, it's what's sure to happen to them as slaves and slaves, and thinks for others, 'stead of thayselves."

"Don't be such an old idiot; you'd far better leave off grumbling, and go to bed."

"Oh, I'm a-going, sir, but I was a-going to take the fire off fast—there's such a deal on it, to be sure, to make a fuss about."

She was able to sneer comfortably without being seen, as she leaned over the fire and lifted the few red embers out of the grate, and carefully smothered them in the ashes beneath; and then lighting a bit of tallow candle, which she placed on a save-all, fixed in a battered tin candlestick, from a tall candle which she had just before relit for Mr. Kirton's benefit, she left the kitchen, beginning another "ere-a-mussy" before she was out of hearing.

Kirton waited till the sound of her heavy footsteps on the carpetless stairs had died away; he then tried the locks of the doors and windows, that of the kitchen and washhouse, and, satisfied that all was safe, carefully raised the heavy brass candlestick from the table, and, after locking the kitchen door behind him, proceeded through the parlour to his study.

He took the key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and

drew a heavy bolt across as soon as he was inside the little den. It was a dingy, musty place, with only one closely-barred window, high up in the wall, and covered with dusty cobwebs, for Biz and her brooms were never permitted entrance; there was a high office desk, covered with old much-defaced black leather, and an old-fashioned high-backed chair to match; an iron safe in one corner of a most antiquated form, and three large iron boxes with rusty padlocks; there was no litter, no heap of loose papers and letters; jealously closed as it was against the females of the household, the study would have offered nothing to reward their curiosity, had it led them to transgress rules—for the drawers of the desk were all fast.

Kirton raised the candle high above his head, and looked anxiously and suspiciously round, to make sure that everything was as he had left it; he seemed satisfied that all was right, and seating himself at his desk, he unlocked it, and produced writing materials.

After slowly composing a draught on a crumpled envelope—Ralph Kirton never wasted anything—he sat leaning his head on his hand, while he read it over several times, striking out a sentence here or a word there, which seemed to make his meaning too plain. Kirton's argument was always, "where's the good of them lawyer chaps, if they can't meet your intentions half way." It was a difficult letter to write: he did not wish his sharp friend Goldsmith to see that he could not manage his own daughter; he only wanted it to appear that he was anxious to give her a few educational advantages at the cheapest possible rate.

The letter took him more than an hour, and when he had finished writing it out fairly, he became aware of a strange, icy sensation in his elbows. I say became aware, because it had been coming on while he wrote, and he had not noticed it; he felt rigid and locked in his chair, while a sudden sharp pain quivered through his heart;—then all was numb and dead, his eyes closed, though he scarcely lost consciousness, but for the greatest temptation that could have been offered him, a heap of bank-notes even, Ralph Kirton could not have moved a finger. One hand still supported his head, the other held the letter loosely; but they were leaden hands—he could not stir them; he tried to open his lips to call for help, but they were dry and parched, and his tongue was immoveable; the weight at his heart increased, he knew that it had ceased to beat, and with this knowledge he lost consciousness.

When he opened his eyes, the candle had burned down far in the socket ; his heart was beating in wild tumultuous leaps, that seemed as if they would suffocate him by their violence, and when he rose to his feet, he was obliged to steady himself by his desk—the room appeared swaying about with him.

With the intuitive presence of mind that seems a gift of Providence to those afflicted by such visitations, he remembered having bought some ammonia on the previous market-day, in order that Hester might renovate one of his waistcoats, and this he knew he had placed in his desk ; he groped for it with difficulty, for he was still obliged to hold fast by the desk for fear of falling. He found it at last, and the pungent smell revived him, but he was powerless to leave the study.

“What is it ?” he said to himself, the sudden awful reality of death coming before him with a startling vividness, for, although this was the most severe, it was not the first of these mysterious warnings ; he passed his hand across his forehead, the fingers were icy and stiff, and yet all his pulses were beating with double life. He tried the ammonia again, and this time it stilled in some measure the suffocating throbs of his heart, but it seemed long to him before he could steady himself sufficiently to reach his bedroom, tottering and staggering like a drunken man, and feeling so utterly exhausted that he could scarcely manage to avoid awakening Hester. He did not want her to know what had happened ; she and Biz would be for having a doctor, and that was an expense he was resolved to do without. Next market day he would speak to young Jacob Bonham, the new doctor at Stedding ; he had known his father before him, a farmer, a thrifty careful man like himself ; Jacob would give him advice without a fee, and so, calculating the cost even of his own life, Mr. Kirton got into bed and fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII.

A YOUNG DOCTOR.

JACOB BONHAM looked grave when he heard of his old friend's attack. He happened to be going home to dinner just as Kirton was leaving the market, so they walked up the High Street together.

"Nothing, you know, of the slightest consequence *now*," he said, in a semi-mysterious way; "but if these attacks should become frequent, why——"

"Why, what?" said Kirton, abruptly, finding that the last sentence remained unfinished; "the reason why I speak to you is to know how to keep 'em off, not because I care to chatter like a woman about my ailments; can you do anything for me—yes, or no?"

"Well, but, Mr. Kirton, that was exactly what I was coming to: if you'll allow me, I'll—I'll make you up something, and bring it round to the farm myself."

"No, thank you," said the farmer; "I'm not a-going to take up your time, Jacob, when I bean't meaning to pay for it; you have it ready in an hour's time, and I'll call for it."

The young doctor walked off; he was hungry and wanted his dinner, but he made up the medicine first, and then, taking down a volume of Tennyson, read while he ate.

Nature had never intended Jacob for a doctor: he had plenty of talent, plenty of goodness of heart, and the active benevolence almost universally to be found in his profession, but he was neither very polished in manner nor ready in speech; there was little that was really practical about him, and he indulged his dreaminess by reading poetry, and thinking of Lucy Wrenshaw instead of his patients. Perhaps another impediment to his success might have been found in the fact that he was, so long as he remained unmarried, independent of his profession: his father, after bringing him up not to expect a farthing from him, had left him a small competence.

If Jacob had had more energy, he might have still retrieved the past; he might have travelled, have sought the fellowship of highly educated men, have purchased even a London practice which would necessarily have given him the polish he wanted and have roused him from his yea-nay *insouciance*; but he was a man of few desires, he was content to vegetate; for the present his skill seemed to satisfy the good people of Stedding; they had never had a clever doctor before, they did not want new-fangled notions, but were willing to take him as they found him.

It was a particularly healthy time just now—there were a few poor people certainly whom he ought to visit, but to-morrow would do—and he turned again to the *Lotus Eaters*, and made up his mind that he would spend the evening at Mrs. Wrenshaw's.

It was a pity he parted so abruptly from Mr. Kirton: five

minutes afterwards Lucy Wrenshaw came up, dressed in her prettiest hat and cloak, for she knew Jacob was rarely away from town on market-day. Mr. Kirton, however, imagined that she was thus smart on account of the young farmers who came into market, and he took fresh umbrage at her vanity.

But few people could withstand Lucy's frank cordiality when she chose to show it.

"Oh! uncle Kirton, I'm so glad I met you—come in and see mamma, and have some dinner."

Kirton was at first shrinking away unsocially, but he knew he was too unpopular among his brethren to have any chance of another invitation, and, after a little pressing, he went in. It was only the second time he had ever entered the house; and Mrs. Wrenshaw, who lived in extreme terror of her sarcastic rude relative, bustled about and scolded the maid for unpunctuality, and put herself and her establishment generally into that happy state of worry which is sure to make everything go wrong.

The dinner came at last, and passed off quietly, but for Mrs. Wrenshaw's perpetual talk to Lucy, though at her brother-in-law. He scarcely spoke to her, but seemed to be studying Lucy with more attention than usual; her mother's perturbation kept her quiet, and he was surprised to be obliged to own to himself that the girl had some sense after all, and certainly a prettier softer manner than Hester's.

"Uncle," she said, taking advantage of a pause in her mother's incessant talk, "I wish you'd let me have Hester to spend a day here. If she came over early in the morning, I'd drive her home in good time after dinner—I would, indeed, and it would be a great pleasure to me."

Lucy was far too clever to imply that there would be any advantage to her cousin in her proposal.

Whether his sudden illness had softened Kirton, or whether he thought a change of any kind might bend Hester's stubborn purpose, it would be hard to say, but to Lucy's great delight and surprise, after remaining silent a few moments, he said, though not graciously, "Well, she may come if she will; but mind, Lucy, don't you go taking her to shops, and tempting her to spend money she hasn't got."

Lucy was so overjoyed, that without a moment's reflection she rushed up and threw her arms round Kirton's neck and kissed him, a proceeding which nearly made him retract his consent; he got up from his seat, feeling, probably, safer in his six feet two

inches of height, and said he must be going home. Lucy blushed and looked awkward, for, though so impetuous, she was a sensitive little damsel, but she said she should drive over the following Saturday, and fetch her cousin, and as he made no opposition, took his consent for granted.

"I'm glad your uncle has gone away, Lucy, I declare I am. I feel quite flustered and out of sorts when he's here."

"That's your own fault then, mamma." Lucy generally spoke her mind to every one except her cousin Hester. "If you take no notice of him, he'd take none of you, you may depend."

"Take no notice! goodness gracious me, child! take no notice of a visitor in one's own house; what can you be thinking of?"

"Well, I don't mean exactly that, I suppose. I know what I mean, but I can't put it into words. Look here, our school-mistress, the head one, Miss Colville, used to say no lady could be elegant who wanted repose—there that is it, mother; I want you to be more elegant, to have more repose."

"Good gracious, child! what nonsense they do talk at schools! But I can tell you, Lucy, your poor father used to call me elegant when I was a girl, but who wants to be elegant at forty-five? However, I must say I think they might teach better breeding at schools, that I do, than to make a girl tell her mother she's awkward."

Here Mrs. Wrenshaw looked indignant and still more wanting in repose.

This way of taking the matter roused Lucy's wrath also.

"Mother, you know I never meant to be rude, and as to saying you were awkward you know I didn't. I don't care about the thing one way or another, only you seem always to get flustered when people come; I feel so too myself sometimes, but I find if I've the sense to leave myself alone, and not fume myself into fiddle-strings as to what they'll think of me, everything seems smoother and more comfortable."

"Ah, well! I suppose you know, Lucy; I don't see the good of having paid sixty pounds a year for your schooling, unless you're to know some things that I don't."

"Now, mother dear, you know I don't mean that; I hate you to say that sort of thing," and she threw her arms round her mother's neck and kissed her; such a kiss—there was scarcely any outward sound about it, but it hurt Mrs. Wrenshaw's soft round cheek, and left a red flush on it.

"Lucy, Lucy, child! you've pushed my cap off."

"Oh! never mind, you must go up and put on a fresh one, there's company coming to supper."

"Company! oh, I dare say! that young doctor again, I suppose. Well, I'm sure; how do you know he's coming, Lucy?"

Lucy felt very angry that her mother should take this tone in speaking of Jacob Bonham; out-spoken as she was herself in most things, she had a delicate mind, and she shrank from any joking on the subject; she had talked lightly of him to Hester, but each time she saw him now she felt more doubtful that he liked her; she looked confused, but tried to answer quite indifferently.

"I don't know for certain of course, but the two last market days he has been here, so it's natural he should come to-night."

"I wish to goodness, child, you'd opened your mouth this morning," said her mother, rather testily; "there's nothing in the world for supper, except the ham."

"Why, there was an ocean of meat pie left at dinner, and I bought a cream cheese at market this morning—such a beauty; just get a cucumber, mother dear, and there'll be supper for six, in no time."

"Supper for six! gracious, Lucy, you don't surely expect six, do you?"

Lucy burst into a hearty laugh.

"Oh! six and twenty if you like to fancy it, mother dear," and she sat down to her pianoforte, and began to sing "Love's young dream." She had a pretty voice and had been well taught; although her mother persisted that the untrained wildness of her voice had been much better worth listening to; as it was there was plenty of wildness in the expression: in everything Lucy resembled a wild plant trained to grow properly in a trim garden; for a while the cultivation she had received would restrain her exuberance, but when once she became familiarized, the old freedom would burst all restraint and she was as eccentric as ever.

This afternoon she was evidently putting a curb upon herself: she set the drawing-room so perfectly neat that it looked tasteless and prim; she then went upstairs and smoothed every rebellious hair into the most glossy precision; she changed her collars and cuffs three times before she could decide which were the most lady-like; she said to herself that she had hitherto had her flighty flirty manner with Jacob, and this had, of course, encouraged him, and prevented her from judging him carefully. She

had nothing to say against his profession ; a doctor in such a town as Stedding was as much as she could aspire to ; but the idea that her cousin Hester was admired by a real London gentleman gave her an unpleasant feeling of envy and also of discontent, spite of her generous nature.

The evening came at last, and when Mr. Bonham appeared, Lucy remarked, as she might have done before, only she had never thought of it, that he wore shepherd's plaid trousers and a shooting coat : she thought he might have dressed a little better when he knew he was coming to see ladies ; besides, doctors always dress in black : she had not found out yet that Jacob was very shy ; he concealed it under a smiling bland manner, which to so careless an observer as Lucy made him seem at his ease.

He came to Mrs. Wrenshaw's this evening feeling more self-possessed than usual, for Lucy's manner had been very encouraging as they walked home from church the previous Sunday. Doctor though he was, Jacob managed to go to church on Sunday evenings. He went up to her now with a genuine smile, but her stiff reception sent him back into his shell : he was no longer only shy, he was alarmed, for he thought he must have done something to vex her. He knocked a chair down as he hurried across the room to speak to Mrs. Wrenshaw, and, catching the table cover with his coat, dragged it half off, and Lucy's workbox along with it. He turned full of apologies, but her expression of disgust effectually repelled him from making any proffers of assistance, and roused his pride. He sat down by her mother, and began to talk without taking any further notice of Lucy.

This was the best way of treating her : she began to think she was cross and hard upon Jacob, for after all most men were rather awkward—she sighed as she thought Mr. Hallam was sure to be an exception to this rule. But Lucy was too forgiving, she cared too much about love and kindness herself, to keep for long even a cold seeming with any one. She was just the woman to be trampled on by a cold-hearted man, and with plenty of spirit to feel the wrongs of others, she was, if possible, too apt to believe herself to blame—that is to say, too apt, for worldly wisdom ; in a true man this would probably create deeper love than any witching wiles, or calm self-possessed superiority ; but Lucy's lot was not yet decided, and if she chose badly, chances were fearfully against her.

“ Lucy, dear, won't you sing ? ” said Mrs. Wrenshaw ; sing ‘ Barbara Allen. ’ ”

Lucy sang ; she had scarcely sufficient power for the touching old ballad, but the feeling she threw into it was infectious.

Jacob, who had been making vain attempts at turning the leaves, always taking two at a time, suddenly let them go altogether, buried his face in his pocket-handkerchief, and never thanked her when she rose from the music-stool.

"Don't get up, Lucy ; let's have something cheerful now ; that does send one into the doldrums, after all," said her mother.

"Not directly, I can't put comedy on the top of tragedy ; can I, Mr. Bonham ?—I'll let you down gently," and she began one of those exquisite German accompaniments which seem to mingle with the voice itself. She sang it with the English words, however, which rather spoiled the effect ; but Mrs. Wrenshaw thought the words the best part of a song, and could not bear to listen to what she did not understand.

Lucy had not much chance of talking to Mr. Bonham ; her mother thought it a good opportunity of getting some advice gratis, and asked the young doctor about a crooked joint in her little finger which she said looked ominous ; then she wanted to know the truth of a little bit of scandal about the squire's eldest daughter, "who, folks did say, had settled to run away with a spendthrift young officer, and was it true they had been stopped ?"

Mr. Bonham really knew nothing about the matter, but his denial did not serve him.

"Ah, you doctors, you're so deep ; you get at all the secrets of all the families, and then you only tell 'em to those you like."

"Really, Mrs. Wrenshaw," faltered poor Jacob, "I—I'm not particularly inquisitive."

"Of course you're not," said Lucy, abruptly, "and mamma's joking," and then, before her surprised parent could remonstrate, she said,—"I wish, Mr. Bonham, you would call in on Saturday ; my cousin Hester is coming, and I should like you to meet."

The instant the words were uttered she wished them unsaid ; but he answered quickly and readily for a wonder, that he should be delighted to call in on that afternoon, he had to go a long round in the evening.

"Well," said Lucy, with a saucy laugh that brought back all his shyness, "there would be no use in coming in the evening, we should be out."

Poor Jacob had intended his earnest answer to be understood

as a sign of love, but Lucy's laugh suddenly blurred the impression which had begun to strengthen in the young doctor's heart: a wife who would laugh at him—and he knew there was a good deal to laugh at in his awkward ways—would be a perpetual blister, and he probably shrank from the idea of trying one of his own remedies.

He said “good-night,” far less nervously than usual, for it seemed to him he cared no longer about pleasing Miss Wrenshaw, and with a woman's usual contradiction she was sure she had never liked him so well before.

Lucy was a great talker, at least she liked to keep her tongue from rusting; she did not chatter an hour at a time about dress or gossip, or the shape of one person's ear and another's nose, stringing together sentences all expressive of the same meaning, only constructed of different words, till her listeners felt desperate under the monotonous worry: Lucy talked to the purpose even when most excited, and her talk was generally amusing; but to-night she was so silent after Jacob Bonham's departure that her mother remarked it.

“The truth is I feel stupid, mother, and I think we had both much better go to bed.”

Lucy's sleep was disturbed by very unpleasant dreams—Jacob Bonham was persuading Hester to run away with him, and just as, to Lucy's despair, her cousin had consented, a tall gentleman with long whiskers appeared and declared himself to be Hester's brother. She woke up in that half-conscious state, when the dream seems the reality, and began to try and remember about this brother of Hester's, and what he was like, whether he would be kind to her, and whether he would love her. No one would have called Lucy vain or selfish, and yet this craving after affection made her appear to think constantly of herself; deep in her heart lay the conviction, that no man who knew her intimately could ever love her well enough to make her his wife; and her honest nature told her that she must be so known before she would marry, her husband should know every failing and folly before he became really such. “And so it will be,” she went on, as, having at length thoroughly awakened, she thought over the previous evening. “Now that Jacob Bonham begins to understand me, he cares for me no longer, and, to finish it completely, I am going to let him see Hester. Well, it is better before than after; suppose we had been engaged and then he had taken a fancy to her,—that would have been dreadful.”

CHAPTER VIII.

MARTHA HALLAM DECLINES LUNCHEON.

MISS MARTHA HALLAM had come to pay her sister-in-law a visit. There was not much love between these two ladies, but they had a due regard to the maintenance of family harmony ; they always spoke of each other as "dear Martha" and "dear Louisa ;" but they never could spend half an hour together without using the sisterly privilege of finding fault.

Mrs. Hallam was a fair, blue-eyed, comely dame full of elegant helplessness.

Miss Hallam was rather tall, very dark and slender ; there was restlessness in every feature and in every movement. She walked across a room angularly, and generally contrived in her rapid passage to knock over a chair, or commit some other awkwardness ; not that she ever owned to this : she never saw anything she did not wish to believe, and she never believed anything she did not choose. You could not tell Martha Hallam any news ; could rarely take her by surprise ; had she been told an eclipse was expected, she would have answered she knew all about it ; in fact, she gave one the idea that she must have been favoured with private information on every subject.

Mrs. Hallam possessed every personal advantage over Martha ; but although the latter was not really clever, she was both quick-witted and quick-tongued. Without being well-born or thoroughly well-educated, Mrs. Hallam had that lofty manner and that languid indolence which impose wonderfully on a great many besides the vulgar. In personal habits Martha was probably the truer lady of the two. She lived in her own house—a pretty little villa near Regent's Park—a pattern of precision and neatness, and while Mrs. Hallam's maids wore silk gowns, lace caps, &c., Martha's never displayed a brooch or a bow ; the extent of their crinoline even was limited.

Miss Hallam could have kept her carriage if she chose ; but she preferred making another use of her money. "What were her legs given her for if she did not use them, and there were plenty of cabs ?" This was a sore trial to the elegant Louisa. She would gladly have ignored the fact of cabs, except as vehicles made for young men ; it was provoking of Martha to persist in having one sent for, sometimes when two carriages were standing at the door ; it was disagreeable that even her friends' coachmen

and footmen should know that she received a visitor who used cabs. Miss Hallam could easily have walked both ways, and sometimes did so, although it was rather a long distance to Wilton Place from Park Village; she was one of those irritating people who are never tired and never ill, and therefore consider such weaknesses affected and unnecessary in others. Martha Hallam would perhaps have called this severe judgment; but until we live in the Palace of Truth, people must be judged by what they seem, and if they persist in a hard, unsympathizing manner, why, they must take the consequences.

She must have been tired to-day, though she would not admit it; she had walked through the burning mid-day sun of July, and yet when she was ushered into Mrs. Hallam's luxuriously furnished drawing-rooms, where the difficulty was to find a seat that was not intended to lounge in, she chose one of those straight stiff-looking chairs, with a small oblong piece of padded velvet in the midst of its quaintly-carved back, adapted rather for penance than comfort. It was a very pretty room, not owing half so much of its tasteful arrangement, however, to its owner, as to her son; the chairs and sofas were some of them covered in violet velvet, others in chintz, with gay groups of flowers on a pale green ground; but it is useless and tiresome to make an inventory of the furniture, or of the ornaments which filled the room—they were all rather elegant than showy. One contrast fixed attention as one entered: the charming relief given to the rich folds of the violet velvet curtains by the snowy muslin beneath; and this carried the eye on insensibly to the massive pure white marble mantelpieces, so plain and so broad, the only carving about them consisting in the heavy bosses supporting each shelf.

"You must be tired, Martha, dear," said Mrs. Hallam as she came in; it seemed strange that she should always forget her sister's ways.

"Not at all tired, thank you; I'm such an excellent walker, you know, and the distance is so trifling—nothing to tire any one. I enjoy sunshine, you know; it never hurts me."

"So fortunate you have come to-day. You'll stay luncheon, now, won't you?"

"Luncheon! no, thank you. Why, you know, Louisa, I always dine at half-past one o'clock; how could I eat luncheon?"

"I thought, dear," said Mrs. Hallam, smiling sweetly, now

that her sister had refused, "that you would have perhaps made it your dinner. I expect Frederic will come home then, and I knew you would like to see him."

"Oh! Fred's coming, is he? Why didn't you say so before?" said Martha, testily. One of her rules was never to unsay her own words, and yet she would have given up anything but her own will for the pleasure of her nephew's company. "Coming away from office, is he? Well, I'll stay till one o'clock. He's sure to be here by that time, I suppose; and then if I take a cab, I shall be home in time for dinner."

Mrs. Hallam shrugged her shoulders and looked ill-used.

"It looks so absurd, Martha, just to go out of the house when we sit down to luncheon; I wish you wouldn't do it—I am sure Frederic will be annoyed."

"Oh, no; Fred will be nothing of the kind, Fred and I quite understand one another."

Mrs. Hallam did not answer, but she writhed; it was so impertinent of Martha to affect to understand Fred better than his mother did.

"How drooping your ferns are," said Miss Hallam, cheerfully; "you should see mine; they are double the size of those."

"Ah, I haven't your wonderful energy, you see," said her sister, languidly; "I dare say you renew the soil, and all that kind of thing; with my chest I could not undertake such fatigue."

"Chest! fiddlestick! a little stooping over fresh earth would do you good, Louisa, far more good than reading those silly French novels you are so fond of; not that I do anything to my ferns, but just attend to them; but then my plants always live."

"Yes," said Mrs. Hallam, quietly, "I think single women's flowers and plants always do thrive; I suppose it is because they have nothing else to do but to attend to them;"—here Martha nearly bounded from her chair; but Mrs. Hallam's silver flow of speech went on, unheeding the interruption. "There are the Miss Goldsmiths, you know; really their myrtles are quite surprising."

"Pray, Louisa, don't say I know the Miss Goldsmiths; I know nothing whatever about them, except that they are all but Dissenters. I hope you will never repent encouraging Frederic to visit people of that kind."

"Mr. Goldsmith visits the Fortescues."

"I don't care who the Fortescues visit. I am quite sure that Goldsmith's a Jew—a nasty yellow old cheat."

"Ah, Martha, how can you——"

"I can always say what I mean, and I always shall, and I wonder that you, with your aristocratic notions, should encourage Fred to visit such low people."

"Low people! why they live in a magnificent house; furnished far better than this is."

"I don't estimate people as auctioneers do," said Miss Hallam, shaking herself angrily in her chair; "my own notion is that Goldsmith's been a Jew broker, and as for his sisters, I can't endure them."

"Why, I thought you just now said you didn't know them."

"Ah, no, how should I know them? the look of them, with their hands full of tracts, is enough for me."

"Poor things! they are very eccentric; you know, dear, single women sometimes are; but still I cannot see how the sisters' religious views can affect Frederic's intimacy with Mr. Goldsmith."

"There are none so blind as those that won't see, Louisa, and you know, as I so often tell you, you will always look at everything through your own spectacles,—at least you don't wear them, but you will when you do."

Mrs. Hallam was greatly relieved to hear the ring announcing her son's arrival; she would have preferred having him all to herself, but the *tête-à-tête* was becoming too unbearable even for her placidity.

"Ah, aunt Martha, how d'ye do? why, I have not seen you for a long time."

"That's not my fault, Fred; you know where I live, and how to get there."

"Well, I am very sorry, indeed I am," he said, his handsome face assuming a half look of contrition; "I really will come as soon as possible, but, aunt, you do live in such an out-of-the-way place."

Miss Hallam laughed, she generally laughed when she was annoyed.

"I live so very far beyond Regent's Park, Fred."

"I don't often visit Regent's Park, if you mean that," said her nephew, lolling back in his chair, and pulling out his long silky whiskers; "it's a long time, I can tell you, since Goldsmith has given me a dinner."

"I'm sure I am very glad to hear it."

"What an unnatural observation! glad that your promising nephew should have a good dinner the less! But I say, aunt Martha, what a pretty bonnet you have got! where did you buy it?"

Miss Hallam was completely mollified; she had really no taste in dress, but she thought she had, and she adored her nephew's opinion; praise from him was delicious, and as it was not very frequent, for she had spoiled him out of all deference, she was doubly happy to have chosen this day of all others for her visit; how she wished she could stay a little longer, but she would punish herself rather than let Louisa have the satisfaction of saying she did not know her own mind. Just as she was resolving to send for a cab, a letter arrived for her nephew: he walked to the window to read it, then thrust it into his pocket and returned to his aunt, but he now looked so perplexed and worried that she felt convinced the letter was from some importunate tradesman—she had always been very angry with her brother's will and fully persuaded that her sister-in-law might do more for Fred.

"Will you come and drink tea with me to-morrow?" she said, in a low voice; "I want to talk a little business, Fred."

"I am very sorry I cannot," he replied, and he really was; those "business" teas at his aunt's were well understood by him—they usually replenished his purse; "but I find I must leave town to-morrow, and shall, perhaps, be away for a day or two."

"Leave town!" said his mother; "why, Frederic, only this morning at breakfast you said you would take me to see those pictures in Bond Street to-morrow."

"Ah, I did not know then," said Hallam.

Both mother and aunt strongly suspected the letter was from Mr. Goldsmith, but neither of them dared to ask. Frederic never allowed what he called petticoat interference, and was always rather mysterious in his proceedings.

He was evidently anxious no notice should be taken now.

"I tell you what, aunt—I'll bestow the supreme felicity of my presence on you next Monday; you can wait tea till eight, can't you?"

"My dear boy, you know your aunt drinks tea at five punctually," said Mrs. Hallam.

"Fred always chooses his own hours when he comes to me; don't you, Fred? And now I must say good-by; there's your luncheon bell; what a cracked sound it has, Louisa! I never

heard anything so funny." And when the servant threw open the door to announce luncheon, she begged him to send for a cab for her, and, spite of all protests, departed in it without eating anything.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN FORTESCUE.

BUT Frederick Hallam did not leave town very early next day. After he said good-by to his mother, he told his man to pack up a few things for him, bring them on to Captain Fortescue's in Jermyn Street and wait there till he arrived ; he then went to his office and obtained leave of absence, and, hailing a cab, told the driver he wanted a good turn along the Edgware Road. As soon as he was clear of London he took out the letter he had received in Wilton Place and read it over again. Its contents seemed to disturb him strangely : he pulled his luxuriant whiskers to their utmost extent, as if seeking to extract their opinion on the matter, and then, taking off his left-hand glove, twisted round and round the seal ring on his little finger ; he then held his hand up and minutely examined it, and its contemplation appeared to have soothed him.

He presently threw up the little trap and desired to be driven to Jermyn Street.

As soon as he arrived there he sprang out of the cab, and, without waiting for any ushering, ran upstairs and knocked at a door on the first floor.

"Come in," said a man's voice, and Hallam entered.

The room was furnished with taste, but with far less expense than Hallam's own sitting-room in Wilton Place. There were more books and pictures here, fewer showy ornaments, and a considerable absence of neatness. The owner was lying on a sofa, but he started up as Hallam appeared.

He was tall and elegant, rather older than Frederic, and strikingly different in appearance, for he was pale, and rather melancholy looking, with dark brown eyes and hair, and irregular features ; but it was a face which inspired far more interest than Hallam's, although it might not, perhaps, have commanded such instantaneous admiration ; there was a languor, too, about Captain Fortescue, far more dignified than the rapid movements of his

friend ; the one was a man of thought, the other essentially a man of action—and yet they suited exactly. Fortescue was not vexed with Hallam's vanity, because he was too really gifted to be vain himself, and Hallam revered his friend's superior intellectual qualities, although he considered himself far in advance about dress, knowledge of the world, and such matters, wherein he declared Fortescue to be much too careless. Curiously enough, Fortescue consulted Hallam more than Frederic took counsel of him, probably because people who think are more apt to be troubled about trivial every-day questions than by those of graver importance. Hallam rarely asked his friend's advice except in money matters—he had not wanted it—for his were usually trivial troubles, and he preferred managing them himself ; but now he would have given much to be able to consult him, and yet something warned him not to do so.

"You must be wonderfully strong, old fellow," said Fortescue, "to go rushing about in the heat of the sun such a day as this. Here am I dead beat and fully determined to stay on this sofa till I've finished my book."

"You would not feel the heat half so much if you went into the air instead of mewing yourself up here with a book : why I have been nearly to Kingsbury and back, and I feel quite fresh and cool."

Fortescue got up from the sofa and laughed.

"You look cool, decidedly. Why, you have bloom enough for six Hebes just now. What on earth took you down to Kingsbury?"

"The air ; nothing but my sanitary ideas on the value of change of air ; there's nothing like air when you've cobwebs in your brain. But, I say, Fortescue,"—he had spoken before as if thinking of something else, and now he looked a little nervous and as if he were doing something he was ashamed of—"look here : if you had a small property—down in the north, we'll say—and you heard that something was going a little wrong with it, what should you do, eh?"

"Do ? why, go down and look after it. You, of all practical, sharp people, to ask such a question ! Why, what's the matter with you, Fred ? Is the property a lady ? I shall begin to think you are in love."

"In love ! that's good. No, I leave that to a sentimental captain who lies on a sofa reading poetry. Love is an article I mean to eschew all my life ; quite unnecessary in marriage, take my word for it."

"I cannot agree with you ; at least, I am quite sure I should hate a wife unless I loved her ; but, my dear fellow, we need neither of us anticipate evils. Have you seen our soft-spoken Goldfinch lately ? "

"No, but I must see him soon."

"I tell you what, Hallam : you know I don't often volunteer anything, and you are supposed to be sharp enough to take care of number two and number one as well ; but I wouldn't let things go on long with Goldsmith without squaring if I were you : he's all right, of course, but he might forget, or he might die suddenly and leave his accounts queer : we do hear of such things : you understand. My advice is, square up."

"I wish I could square, by Jove ! I do," said Hallam, looking wonderfully grave for him. "Hang it all, Fortescue ! you've done away with all the good of my country drive. You are one of Job's comforters. But, look here : you won't find me for three or four days ; I'm going out of town. I called partly to tell you this, and partly to ask you to make my excuses to your sister-in-law."

"Ah, I hear you and Helena have been great friends lately ; you are a clever fellow with women, Hallam ; now I could never take trouble enough to be a favourite with Helena ; she wants so much worship ; and although she is my brother's wife, and, of course, I feel brotherly affection and courtesy towards her, she's not my sort of woman."

"There's your fastidiousness again. Why, she's about the easiest woman to please I ever saw ; you've only got to swear by all her opinions ; to yield her implicit obedience, and a good deal of respectful admiration ; not difficult the last, for, mind you, Fortescue, she's awfully handsome, sometimes."

"That is just the word for her," interrupted his friend laughing ; "she *is* awfully handsome. But I detest that severe dark-browed beauty ; she would make a splendid Judith."

"Well, I'm not a sentimental man ; but I like to look at beauty wherever I see it ; I'm quite catholic in that ; only I prefer it well dressed," and he shuddered at the remembrance of the "pink gingham gown." "But I must be off ; I'll drop you a line to say when I am returned."

"Are you going far ? " inquired his friend, looking rather mischievous.

"No : I'll tell you all about it some day, old fellow ; it's a pure matter of business, believe me," and they parted with a hearty shake of the hand.

Later in the afternoon, as it grew cooler, and having finished his book, Captain Fortescue sauntered towards Mayfair to deliver his friend's message to Lady Helena Fortescue.

She was exceedingly indignant that Mr. Hallam should venture to send her a message, and, as her brother told Frederic afterwards, looked cruelly and awfully beautiful in her disdain.

"People whom I honour by invitations, Captain Fortescue, should either make or write their own apologies; or rather your friend should have known the state of his engagements better when he accepted mine. I ask him here because, as your friend. I wished to show courtesy to him; but as he does not appreciate the distinction, it is a pity to waste it on him."

Most people feared Helena Fortescue; especially when her words came out in a dry, sententious, calm manner, utterly at variance with the scornful anger flashing from her beautiful black eyes. Her face was, as her brother-in-law had hinted, Jewish in type: you looked at it more as a picture than a reality, unless her anger was roused: not that she often gave way to unseemly bursts of passion; she could always curb her temper when she chose, for her will was as strong as any impulse; but she could not control the expression of her eyes and mouth, and they told demoniac tales sometimes.

Captain Fortescue, quiet, gentle, and indolent as he appeared, had yet to learn what fear was, either of man or woman; he returned her haughty glance with interest now.

"Helena, I can't quite see how *your* notice can confer distinction on *my* friend."

"Possibly not; but then, Percy, you should choose your friends differently. Mr. Hallam, from what I hear, has risen completely from the ranks."

"Helena! he is a gentleman, and quite as well educated as you or I."

"Educated! what has education to do with it? The middle class *must* be well educated, they can't exist without it; it don't signify nearly so much to us."

Captain Fortescue looked at her in undisguised amazement; he felt pity, almost contempt, for her; his anger was also roused at her insolence.

"I did not expect this from you, Helena, with all your prejudices; so really well-born a woman as you are ought to show your nobility by repudiating such an unwise notion, which, I am sorry to tell you, is not really high class in origin; it sounds

to me a very would-be-noble one; I am sure it cannot be your own."

She did not deign him the slightest reply—even by a look; and the captain congratulated himself that she was not his wife, and that she had not given his brother any children—they would certainly have been tiger cubs rather than children, he thought, if they had resembled their mother.

He soon took leave, and walked slowly home, wondering if he should ever marry: he scarcely thought so; he had never yet seen a woman he could make a companion of; to live as his brother and Helena did, seeing scarcely anything of each other, would not have suited him at all. He was happy tempered, and determined to be happy: his idea of marriage was a household full of love and peace; anything discordant or jarring, either in temper or tastes, would have ruffled the calm of his life, and made him, perhaps, a tyrant; but sympathy had singular power over him, and gentleness acted like a charm; the fault he found with women was, that the gentle ones were cold and mindless, while more ardent and high strung natures were often passionate and uncontrolled; he probably wanted a woman made on purpose for him.

CHAPTER X.

"THE COPSE BIT."

"If you don't mind what you're about, you'll spill us in the ditch."

Mr. Bonham started at the suddenness of the warning.

Hester had kept silence during the first part of the way; Jacob having undertaken to drive the cousins from Stedding to Kirton's Farm early on the evening of Hester's holiday; but as soon as they were clear of the town, he was so continually turning round to see that Lucy, who was sitting behind, was all right, or else to address some observation to her, that their progress was often rather zigzag than straight. "It was worse than that just now," Hester continued; "but if you want to talk, I'll take the reins."

Jacob thought he preferred being laughed at by Lucy, to Hester's lecture—it was so harsh and so abrupt. She had been much too ill at ease to speak to him during the afternoon: she dreaded being thought a dunce; but anything that roused her contempt conquered her shyness; and she fairly despised a man

who drove as badly as Jacob had been doing. Hester had been accustomed to horses all her life, and could ride and drive much better than the young doctor. Lucy was also a fearless "whip;" but she thought Hester very rude and presuming to speak so to Mr. Bonham. She tossed her head: the action was lost on Hester, who sat beside Jacob, her eyes fixed on the pony.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Kirton," he said, nervously; "but I suppose Bob knows the road pretty well by this time, doesn't he? your cousin often goes to see you, I fancy——"

"No, she don't; I wish she did," was the abrupt reply.

"I wish you would tell me, Miss Lucy, when you're likely to be going, and I would always come and drive you home: the evenings are growing darkish for you to be coming home alone."

This was an unusually courageous request from Jacob: he felt as if Hester were a sort of protection; she did not seem like a person apt to ridicule others.

But Lucy was annoyed rather than pleased, and she scarcely knew why. It might have been that, though she was angry at Hester's interference, it had lowered Jacob in her opinion. Whoever she cared for must also have the good opinion of mankind. Those who have a keen sense of the ridiculous in others are the first to shrink from it when aimed at themselves or those they love; or, and probably this was the stronger motive, she thought that if Mr. Bonham were really in love with her, he ought to know about her comings and goings by instinct, and surprise her by meeting her instead of asking a formal permission.

"Thank you, you're very kind," she answered, stiffly, "but I'm not a bit afraid of going home alone; Bob doesn't require looking after, and we are too well known to fear any annoyance."

Jacob had become so completely captivated with Lucy during the afternoon, that he could not bear this change in her tone, and, forgetting all about the pony and Hester's warning, he turned suddenly round to see whether her face corresponded with her voice.

They were now in the pleasantest part of the way, for the shortest drive to Kirton's Farm was not straight along the high road; you could cut off a great angle by taking what was called the "Copse bit," a broad grassed road with gates at each end and bordered by stately elms whose branches stretched nearly from side to side. The sun was setting behind them on the right hand, and the shadows of their massive trunks and luxuriant foliage fell across the track, completely concealing the uneven and grass-

grown ruts ; every here and there was a space where some of the trees had perished, but they had left a record among their brethren, in the grassy hillocks that now served as headstones to their remains, while the brown roots veining the space around, seemed the inscription of their departed glories.

They were close to one of these openings when Jacob's love overcame his prudence.

He turned so completely round as to intercept Hester's view of the side of the road they were nearest to ; but she was hardly conscious of it : she had turned her head away, with a bitter sense of the difference between herself and her cousin ; why should Lucy ride and drive wherever she pleased like a lady, and she be always tied at home like a slave : she might ride certainly, but she had no fitting clothes ; she could only gallop about her father's fields, and the new longing after refinement growing in her made her shrink from driving the chaise-cart now ; all this disturbed her.

As she sat rebelling against her father's parsimony, she saw, curling like a wreath of snow behind the trees, the steam of the London down-train. London, what a wonderful place that must be ! Should she ever see it ? Even if her aunt, Mrs. Wrenshaw, ever asked her to stay with her there, would her father let her go ? She sat quite still, sightless and senseless now to outward things, debating this important question. It was rare for Hester to be thus abstracted ; she had taken a leaf out of Lucy's book this evening : so much change and variety during the day had tired and confused her, and she was unconsciously allowing her brain the repose it needed. A sudden and violent jolt roused her, and pitched Mr. Bonham into a deep ditch, which, partially concealed by the swelling of the green hillocks and the trunks of the trees, extended along the extreme edge of the road, and which Bob had closely approached.

Hester leaned forward and tried to grasp the reins, but she could not reach them ; Jacob as he fell had clutched at them convulsively, and by this means had nearly drawn the light carriage on the top of himself. Hester turned to look for Lucy : she was behaving admirably, sitting perfectly still, though looking very frightened, so there was no difficulty about her. It was very hazardous to get out, the ditch being too wide to attempt it on that side, and on the other the carriage slanted up so as to present a formidable obstacle : but Hester had never known fear ; gathering her gown closely round her, she just said,—“ Mind, Lucy, the jerk,” and jumped clear down a few feet off.

She then approached Bob, who had stood as nearly still as the drag on the reins would allow, and held his head while Lucy scrambled over the back of the carriage.

"I'll hold Bob," said Lucy, "while you help Mr. Bonham."

But he had helped himself, although with considerable difficulty, for one wheel was pressing on his shoulder, as he lay at the bottom of what, fortunately for him, was a dry ditch; his face and one hand were a good deal scratched and cut with the briars and potsherds scattered about, but he assured the girls that he was not at all hurt.

"Here's a pretty business!" said Lucy. She could not help laughing, now the danger was over and she was assured that Jacob had no bones broken. "This is quite romantic, Mr. Bonham, isn't it? I don't see the least what we're to do; we can never right the pony carriage without help."

"I am afraid not," said Jacob, looking very guilty, and involuntarily rubbing his shoulder; "it's rather heavy."

And then he and Lucy stood still, as if they thought help would come out of the tree-trunks.

Hester had taken her full share in the laughter. "We can't leave the chaise here all night," she said, decidedly. "I'll walk on home and send some of the men; at any rate, I'll get Peter."

"No, no, Hester; you mustn't go alone; I promised uncle to see you home safe, and if I don't keep my word he'll never let me have you again: I'll go with you."

"Nonsense, Lucy! there's no need; I can explain to father."

But Lucy for once was obstinate.

Jacob looked dismayed, he had not counted on losing Lucy.

"Then how will you get home, Miss Wrenshaw; it won't do to leave Bob, I suppose?"

"No, that it won't, I'm sure," said Hester; "but if Lucy will come with me, I can send Peter back with her, and then you can settle with him what's best to be done. Come, Lucy, if we are going, let's start."

This was a dismal ending to Jacob's pleasant evening; instead of the delights of a drive home to Stedding, alone with Lucy, to be left to mount guard over a chaise and a pony, and probably this Peter would have to go back to Stedding with them, as he very much doubted the soundness of the vehicle after its tumble, and then he should have no opportunity of speaking to Lucy. He had almost resolved to risk his fate that very evening; it would be easier in the dusk, he thought, than in broad daylight. How

angry he was with himself! Lucy had laughed as if it were a joke, and had scarcely spoken to or looked at him since the accident; and no wonder. He felt his face, the blood was trickling down his left cheek, and his hand would be unpresentable for several days to come. He had taken off one of his gloves only a few minutes before the accident—by good fortune the left one. He wondered how long the girls would be walking to Kirton's Farm. He wished he had a book, but somehow the thoughts of Lucy soon occupied him so fully that he forgot time and all else. It was fortunate that Hester before she started had unharnessed Bob from the carriage, only just looping the reins to the back seat, so that there was no risk of his straying.

Hester walked on for some distance silently beside Lucy, who, now that she had time to think, was almost choked with mortification: what could Hester think of Jacob's awkwardness? and she had felt so proud of showing him to her, and so pleased because he had dressed himself better than usual, and by this stupid accident he had spoilt all.

She did not know how to break the silence; she longed to find out what Hester thought of Jacob, and yet it would be a bad moment to choose for asking her; she raised her eyes, but Hester's face was averted; she was looking straight on towards the gate at the end of the Copse Bit, now only a little way off, and as Lucy's glance followed her cousin's, she saw that some one was leaning against the gate. Had she been less impulsive, a keener survey would have shown her that, instead of a smock-frocked labourer, it was a well-dressed gentleman.

"Oh, Hester! run, there's a man; he'll help with the carriage."

"Hush, Lucy! don't you see he is a gentleman?" and she turned her face away so as to hide it from her cousin. The next moment the gate was thrown open, and the gentleman advanced towards them.

"Miss Kirton!" he exclaimed, raising his hat, and then holding out his hand, "I am delighted to meet you again; I have just been calling at your house, and was coming away quite disappointed to have missed the pleasure of seeing you."

Hester blushed and trembled; she literally did not know what to say.

Lucy had slid her hand into her cousin's arm, and she now gave her a pinch; for she guessed this to be the London gentleman, and was determined to be introduced; but Hester would

never have guessed her meaning, if Hallam had not come to the rescue.

“Your cousin”—his bow and admiring glance were not thrown away upon Lucy—“must allow me to introduce myself.”

Lucy bowed.

“I know this young lady is your cousin, Miss Kirton, because Biz told me you were spending the day in Stedding with her; but she said you would be driving home.”

“So we were,” said Lucy; “only”—and she stopped.

“We’ve been upset,” said Hester; but her manner was so much more shy, so much less harsh than at their first interview, that Hallam felt relieved and thankful. To his great satisfaction also she wore a less objectionable gown.

Mr. Hallam expressed the tenderest solicitude, the most anxious fear, lest Miss Kirton should have sustained any injury.

Lucy admired him very much, and thought him the most perfect gentleman she had ever seen; but she could not help wishing Hester would ask him to lend a hand with the carriage.

“Our carriage is in the ditch,” she said at last.

“Ah, I see,” said Mr. Hallam; “and you are hastening home to get assistance.”

“We only want one man to help,” ventured Lucy; and she went on, spite of Hester’s warning glance, “there is a gentleman with it now.”

“A gentleman!” said Hallam, raising his eyebrows.

“Yes, a—a friend of mine,” said Lucy, “who was going to drive me home.”

“Then,” said Hallam, considerably relieved by this intelligence, “if you young ladies will allow me, I will see you safe to Kirton’s Farm; it is getting late for you to be out alone.”

He looked at Hester, but she seemed literally tongue-tied. Lucy, however, was resolved to show the Londoner that she could talk for both.

“Ah, you are not used to country ways, I see; we think nothing of being out at this time down here.”

The conversation went on briskly enough; Hallam exerting all his powers of fascination, and feeling really greatly amused with Lucy’s ready wit and flow of spirits. At last, as if determined to rouse Hester from her silence, he addressed her personally:

“I often think of you with envy, Miss Kirton; far away from the dirt and smoke of London, enjoying the fresh cool air, while we are stifling in the noisy dusty streets.”

Hester looked up and seemed to be meditating an answer ; but Lucy struck in before she could conquer her shyness :

“ And do you know, Mr. Hallam, Hester would give up her fresh air and country life willingly, if uncle would only send her to school. I tell her she'd soon tire of that at her age ; don't you think she would ? ”

The colour deepened on Hester's cheek into an angry glow ; she hated Lucy just then. She had told her all her trouble that afternoon ; but not that it might be repeated to Mr. Hallam.

Hallam gave a start of surprise.

“ My dear Miss Kirton ! what a strange wish ! you would be miserable at school. I have lived in the world a good deal longer than you ; and I am quite sure grown-up young ladies are happiest and best at home ; besides what can you want that school can give you ? ”

“ You don't know,” said Hester, in her old harsh abrupt way ; her anger against Lucy had conquered her shyness for the time ; “ no one knows but myself. I must go to school.”

“ I wish, dear Miss Kirton, you would trust me, and tell me what makes you so anxious to leave home.”

He bent his head, almost caressingly, towards her, and spoke in so low a tone that Lucy could scarcely hear.

Hester's proud spirit rebelled for an instant against what she considered a stranger's interference : but she raised her eyes to his face, and he looked so kind, so brotherly, so earnest to help her, that she yielded to the fascination she had already felt.

“ I—I am so ignorant,” she murmured.

“ You must not think so,” he said, eagerly ; “ at your age people often have such fancies, and then the best way is to read ; you can learn now much more from books than you will at school ; do you know grown up school-girls are my horror ? ”

Hester hung down her head ; she felt overpowered that she should so nearly have incurred Mr. Hallam's horror, and have wished to do what he considered foolish ; for he seemed to her, as he walked beside her, a god of beauty and every manly attribute ; she could have knelt to the ground he trode on. Lucy, in her place, would, perhaps, have felt inclined to kiss it ; but Hester was never demonstrative.

“ Promise me, dear Miss Kirton,” he whispered, “ that you will give up this project ; it would make me utterly miserable, to think of you transformed into anything I dislike.”

She did not answer him. She could not ; her lip quivered,

but she steadied it by pressing it firmly against its fellow; she needed to do this, for the tears had started to her eyes.

The sudden emotion startled even herself;—she could not remember when she had been thus touched to the inner recesses of her heart: for an instant there came back her usual proud struggling against the betrayal of feeling; but to her surprise, this melted away and left a soft, yielding, delicious sensation, which seemed to transform her. She looked up into Hallam's eyes, with such a look as had never been seen in her own before; a look that satisfied him, far more than any words could do, of the wisdom and good effect of his journey. She looked so grateful, so loving, and, above all, so lovely, that for an instant he forgot her breeding, her harsh manner, and even her red hands; and walked on silently beside her, looking at her now downcast face.

Lucy began to find herself one too many; she was dreamy and inattentive; she saw very plainly that something had changed Hester, and that matters were advancing rapidly between her cousin and the Londoner, and she wished herself back with Jacob—no, not with Jacob; she turned crossly from his image as it presented itself—but safe in the pony carriage driving homewards.

There was little more said till they turned down the lane leading to Kirton's Farm, and then Lucy asked Hester whereabouts they should find Peter Stasson.

Hester started; she had forgotten all about him.

“Peter, oh, yes! I'll go in and send him out to you, or won't you come in till I find him?”

“Oh, no! it would only waste time.”

Hester did not venture to ask Mr. Hallam in, but she lingered as they reached the gate, as if she wanted to defer their parting as long as possible.

Lucy stooped down to gather some of the crimson leaves of herb-Robert which gleamed with an almost blood-red tint as the light of the now fast sinking sun fell on them. She was always kind-hearted, but specially so to lovers: she felt puzzled, and began to think Hester had been very sly, for Mr. Hallam's manner was unmistakable, and she had never seen her cousin so subdued and gentle; so she gathered a variety of leaves before she rejoined them at the gate.

Frederic Hallam fully appreciated her conduct, and thought in his own mind that she was “a little brick.” He did not lose an instant of the time thus gained.

“Miss Kirton, I will not come in with you, as I have had

what I wanted—the great happiness of seeing you ; perhaps it would be wise not to mention this meeting to Mr. Kirton.”

Hester looked up wonderingly, and with a half-suspicious glance that made her strangely like her father, but the beseeching expression of his beautiful blue eyes softened her. She looked down again, confused and hesitating.

Hallam stood still, keeping his eyes fixed on her, as if knowing that their glance must compel an answer. At last she said, “ If father asks me, sir, I must tell : I couldn’t tell a lie.”

The coarse word, harshly uttered—for it was an effort to speak out so boldly—jarred Hallam ; perhaps, too, her truthful look might have secretly stirred his conscience to a clearer view of the falsehood he had been acting : he looked first uncomfortable, then reproving.

“ Miss Kirton, I did not think you could suppose me capable of giving you bad advice, but I think it right to mention that your father told me, when I was here before, that he disliked strangers, and I thought he might disapprove of your acquaintance with me. I should be sorry to be forbidden the privilege of speaking to you, supposing we should accidentally meet. Then I may believe—” he paused, looking at her till the magic sympathy of his unseen but felt glance made her again raise her eyes to his—“ that, unless you are directly questioned, you will not say you have seen me ? ”

Hester was unwilling to say yes, but the strange power he had over her compelled her to bend her head assentingly.

“ But Lucy ? ” she said, almost as if she hoped her cousin’s knowledge of the interview must prevent the need of concealment.

“ Oh, leave me to manage with Miss Lucy ; we shall be great friends, I can see : I mean to walk back with her, and see her safe with this gentleman, who is keeping guard over the carriage, and then your Peter can follow at his leisure.”

A dark cloud crossed Hester’s forehead, and a strange spasm wrung her heart. Why should he care to walk with Lucy ; Lucy, who had so many more ways of pleasing than she had ; Lucy, who had a lover of her own ? It was hard, almost unbearable, and yet all the pride of her nature helped her—she would not let Hallam see her annoyance.

Nor did he. As he spoke, he had turned to look for Lucy, and Hester’s brow was smooth before he bade her good-by.

He pressed both her hands, and told her to think of him, for he much needed a faithful friend, and then he drew back from the gate, while she passed in, raising his hat as she did so.

Lucy was running after Hester to say good-by, but Hallam laid his hand gently on her cloak ; she turned sharply ; he had drawn back under the shadow of the great oak-tree near the gate.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Wrenshaw, but, if you have no objection, I will see you safe back to your carriage,” and he looked as if he were asking a favour instead of conferring one.

Lucy fluttered and blushed with delight, and she began to talk eagerly.

Hallam was amused, for, as has been already said, Lucy’s conversation was not mere ordinary talk ; she was always sprightly, often witty, in her remarks.

But he at length remembered that something had been said about a gentleman left in charge of the carriage, so he only walked a short distance from the “Copse bit” gate with her, and then he stopped.

“I am afraid I must now quit your society, Miss Wrenshaw, charming as it is ; perhaps you would do me the great kindness of not mentioning my name to Mr. Kirton.”

Lucy looked surprised, not suspicious, like Hester, but perfectly astonished.

Hallam quite understood her.

“The fact is, as I need hardly tell you, that old gentlemen like your uncle are apt to be just the least in the world touchy. I had no time to go in with your cousin to-night, and Mr. Kirton might feel aggrieved and slighted, and I respect him so highly, I could not bear this to be the case : now do you see my reason ? but I need not ask. Nature did not give you that penetrating look for nothing. I see that you are as discreet as you are charming ; I hope we may meet again, and before long. Miss Wrenshaw, Duke Street, I think you said was your address. There is your friend in the distance. Good-by.”

He shook her hand warmly, and was soon out of sight, leaving her standing looking after him with as strained and anxious a gaze as if he had been her lover instead of Hester’s.

How handsome he was, how graceful, and what a charming way he had of bowing ; so much dignity ! how she wished Jacob Bonham had more dignity ; how polite Mr. Hallam had been to her ! Whatever could he want her direction for ? and if he liked her so much—and it was quite plain he did—perhaps some other gentleman, his brother, or one of his friends might see her and take a fancy to her, as this Mr. Hallam had to Hester. Visions

of a fine London house and a grand marriage flitted through her busy little brain ; but the treason to Jacob was short-lived : the next moment she felt ashamed of it, and was softening to him, almost penitent that she had so enjoyed Mr. Hallam's society.

Jacob had seen her part from the stranger, and now hurried to meet her ; jealousy, surprise, and curiosity all driving him onwards to inquire who the stranger was, with whom she seemed on such intimate terms.

In his eagerness, he grasped her arm.

Lucy was demonstrative, but she was also thoroughly modest, and this familiarity aroused her indignation ; she shook her arm angrily.

"Don't, Mr. Bonham, I don't like it ; and how could you think of leaving Bob ? Good gracious me, it's enough to take mother home a broken carriage, without losing Bob into the bargain !"

"I'm very sorry," said Jacob ; "I've been longing to see you again to tell you so ; but who—who was that walking with you that just said good-by to you ?" He spoke timidly, far more timidly than he had intended, for her rebuff had disturbed him.

"Oh ! nobody you know," said Lucy, without looking at him.

"I saw he was a stranger, but is he a—a relation of yours ?"

"No, only a friend ; how very curious you are, Mr. Bonham !"

And Lucy pressed her rosy lips tightly together, as if determined to check further conversation, but Mr. Bonham was not to be silenced.

"What a pity he did not come on and help with the carriage !"

This was too much for Lucy, although the same idea had occurred to her when first they met Mr. Hallam.

"*He* help with the carriage ! why, bless me, Mr. Bonham, he's a real London gentleman ; fancy his white hands tugging and pulling at the carriage."

Jacob turned scarlet, not from shyness, but from honest anger.

"The true nature of a gentleman, Miss Lucy Wrenshaw, is to help a lady when she is in trouble. Now, I take it, you are in want of help, and, therefore, I should have held your friend a truer gentleman if he had come to your assistance : white hands can do as much work as red ones," and he looked complacently down at his own, which were usually as soft and delicate as a woman's ; but he shivered when he saw the injury the left one

had received, and, after all, as he sulkily thought, on Lucy's behalf, because if she had not encouraged his conversation, he should never have been upset; and this was the way she rewarded him.

They walked silently up to the carriage. Bob was quite safe and contented, taking a comfortable supper off the grass—for the reins being long he could travel round a large circle.

Not another word was said until Peter Stasson and a boy made their appearance, and then the men only talked together, for Lucy withdrew to a little distance, her heart swelling with indignation at Jacob's impertinence.

With some trouble, they at last succeeded in extricating the carriage, but the wheels were injured, and though they could manage to harness Bob, and let him draw it gently along the road, it was quite unsafe for any one to drive.

Lucy turned round suddenly.

“It is a pity to detain you from your evening round, Mr. Bonham. Peter will see me home.”

Jacob murmured some indistinct answer, and advanced to walk beside her, but she quickened her pace, and he was too proud to force his company on her, although he longed to be friends again.

He did not know how to begin, and Lucy kept so near Peter, who was leading Bob, that every word he said must have been overheard, and he had no mind to be laughed at.

Rarely in his life had the young doctor been so out of humour, so thoroughly savage.

CHAPTER XI.

A LOVE LETTER.

MR. JACOB BONHAM was very unhappy, and it was not a quiet misery. He was so recklessly wretched that he kept on walking up and down in his study like a caged beast more than a human being, and when his housekeeper appeared with the supper-tray, he told her abruptly to take it away—he did not want to be disturbed, he wanted nothing, she had better go to bed.

Like many a man who has gone on from boyhood upwards in a calm, indolent, sleepy state of being, with nothing to trouble or vex him, Jacob, during the past fortnight, had been gradually

awakening to the two great sensations which distinguish life from mere existence, the intensity of happiness and suffering, with their attendants, Hope and Fear ; and now that his pulses had quickened, that every sentient part of him was more keenly susceptible than it had ever been, stepped forwards on to the pedestal which, perhaps, every man's heart holds, although in some it may ever remain empty, the sombre figure of Jealousy, clad in the prickly garment which stung whichever way she turned.

He thought of Lucy ; he could think of little else, and he tried to think coolly. Why should he trouble himself about her ? She treated him with less deference than almost any one ; shy as he was, and diffident of his own powers of pleasing, he could not help seeing that there were girls in Stedding, as well brought up and far richer than Lucy, who were always pleased to see him, and either of whom would probably say, Yes, if he asked her to become Mrs. Bonham ; and yet he turned angrily from the thought of them.

How dared Lucy give him the decided encouragement she had during the first part of the drive, and then refuse to satisfy his questions as to whom she was walking with !

His anger, like a wreathing mist, quite obscured thought and judgment at this recollection ; and he stamped heavily as he stood still at last on the hearthrug.

But as soon as the mist had cleared away, and Jealousy could see which way to turn without the fear of a false step which might have toppled her from her pedestal, the prickles made themselves felt.

What a fool he had been not to walk up to Lucy and this stranger when he first saw them just as they were shaking hands ; he would then have satisfied himself as to who and what he was, and whether he was a fit companion for Miss Wrenshaw. Why, after the way she had looked at him soon after they started on their drive, he had a right to throw any fellow into the ditch who stood squeezing Lucy's hand.

And the mist wrapped him round again so completely, that had Frederick Hallam come in his way, Jacob's feelings would have shaped themselves into something more than words.

But as he slowly recovered self-control, the idea of the ditch suggested a humbling reminiscence, and instinctively he looked up at the mirror over the chimney-piece, and saw his cut forehead. If this fellow really were what Lucy said, a London gentleman, he would never have believed that a person of such disorderly, almost

ruffianly appearance, could belong to, or have any right to interfere with, Miss Wrenshaw; but had he any right? and what an idiot he was making of himself, to rave and rant against Lucy when perhaps she might be secretly displeased with him for his faint-heartedness—for the Dumbiedikes style of his courtship. Books said—and Jacob ruled his actions far more by bookish experience than by the realities of human nature—that a faint heart never won a woman; and he had been very submissive to Lucy; against a harsh, rude manner like Miss Kirton's, he knew he should have rebelled long ago. Lucy was quite different and far more terrible to encounter; she was almost always courteous, but then she so often seemed ready to laugh at him, and sometimes she did laugh.

A cold dew rose on his forehead at the mere notion of declaring his love to her; he felt he could not speak it fairly out: he could only look and hint it; and he must have time for this. How long could it go on? would not she become justly indignant, and perhaps totally estranged? He must do something to hasten matters. Oh, why was he such a coward in her presence? Why should she not be his own Lucy? His present intercourse with her was often more a misery than a happiness. Ah! if he could think she would ever be brought to love him, even a little; and then her sweet smiles came back, and he dwelt on every syllable she had uttered; it was maddening that he should have risked her good opinion by his carelessness; but he had meditated on that subject long enough during his lonely watch by the carriage.

What was he to do? He must make up his mind. He seated himself at the table, leaning on his elbows, and plunging his hands deep in his hair. Some men evidently think their ideas lie there.

He felt there was now a sort of quarrel between himself and Lucy: she had walked on in dignified silence, and when they reached the end of Duke Street she had made him a formal courtesy, and, bidding Peter call as he returned from the stable where she had told him to take Bob and the broken carriage, she turned away so rapidly that he could not have overtaken her without running, and he was too angry with her just then for any such overture to reconciliation.

Going calmly over all the events of the evening, he came to the conclusion that she had behaved very ill to him, and it was her place to apologize; but then women were not expected to be as wise as men; and here Jacob held himself erect, and, withdrawing his hands from his hair, put them in his pockets. He

really did love Lucy with all his heart and soul, and thought her the sweetest little angel that drew breath. Still he was fond of himself, too; not personally: he thought himself plainer and more awkward than he really was, and was for ever blushing with self-consciousness; but he had a high idea of his own reading and acquirements; also, but this was a profound secret, locked in his own bosom, he was a Poet: he had never ventured to present one of his effusions to Lucy; but she had been the subject and the inspiration of about half a score of really pretty poems—pretty! they had neither body nor soul, only the mere prettiness of complexion and rhythm to commend them to admiration.

Time passed on, still he could not bring himself to a decision; but the idea of seeing Lucy the wife of another man would continue to haunt him, and was fast driving him desperate.

He pulled out his watch; it was past twelve o'clock: too late, or he really felt valiant enough to go at once to Duke Street, and learn his fate from Lucy herself; he must wait till morning. Morning—at the thought his nervousness returned; in broad daylight he knew he should feel different; and then he was so awkward; he had never talked to any one about such a thing—he wondered how it was managed. At the theatre and in books, he knew the lover sometimes made the offer on his knees. This was a fearful vision. He wondered whether Lucy would expect it; there was something that seemed to him altogether wrong about it. He rose from his chair and shook himself, as if to free his fancy from such an unwelcome picture. How was he to do it? He had, as we see, made some progress, slow as the process seemed. He had started by meditating how he should patch up his quarrel with Lucy, and now he had quite determined to ask her to be his wife, if he could only hit on a feasible method of making the proposal.

Suddenly he started and gave an elephantine bound of delight; perhaps it was fortunate that Lucy was not present: he had found the key to his casket of troubles.

"I will write to her," he exclaimed; "I know I have a fluent pen, however tongue-tied I may be: and she must answer me in writing, and then if it is as I dare hope, we shall meet as lovers, with all unkindness forgotten; if not, why then I shall leave Stedding for ever, and go out to the wilds of Australia."

And having announced to himself this doughty resolution, he vowed that he would not go to bed till he had composed such a letter as should soften the heart of Lucy Wrenshaw.

And Jacob was not long about it.

He was no composer of letters—making a rough draft ; striking out a word here, putting in another there, and dovetailing each sentence into the other, so as to produce the smooth, passionless epistle some people style a “capital letter.” Jacob was a fidget and fastidious, as men of refined taste are apt to be ; and he had refined tastes, although he wore check trousers in the evening, and moved awkwardly in a drawing-room ; but his was not that over-fastidiousness which checks the native movement of the heart and the affections, which would trample feeling and impulse into its own narrow groove, and call everything ill-bred and wrong that does not wear the precise livery of its tenets. Jacob wrote from his heart ; every feeling inscribed on the paper came fresh and warm to his pen ; there was no pausing to shape it more gracefully ; as he experienced it, so it was written down. Long before he had finished, the tears which had been dimming his eyes dropped on the page, and tears that no man need have been ashamed of ; they were the outpourings of a heart stirred to its very depths.

His letter ran thus :—

“DEAREST LUCY,

“I LOVE you, and I dare to think you know it ; but you do not know, you cannot dream, how deep my love is for you. You may scorn and despise it ; but that fear shall not keep me from telling you now, how passionately, how fondly I idolize you. To me you are the perfection of all that is good and beautiful in woman. Dearest Lucy, when I think of your sweet gentle face, hope grows strong within me ; and then I am cast down at the thought that perhaps another is preferred before me.

“Do not leave me in doubt ; if you knew how every hope and thought is centred in you, how wildly every pulse throbs at the thought of calling you my own, you would not lengthen the agony of my suspense. But do not leave me in doubt, Lucy, through any fear of my importunity. Should you find it impossible to love me, tell me this, and you shall never see me again—never again be wounded by my unwelcome intrusion ; only tell me the plain truth.

“Yours, and yours only,

“JACOB BONHAM.”

CHAPTER XII.

HESTER'S SECRET.

"I CAN'T but be thinking what's come to you, Muss Heaster ; ye sit moping indoors, and hardly speak a word to nobody ; ye're quiet enough best o' times, but ere-a-mussy me ! I'd as lief have a hearse and two coffins to keep me company as you this morning ; why, what is the matter, child ?"

Biz turned sharply round from the fire, where she was superintending the boiling of a large piece of bacon, and looked hard at her young mistress.

Hester had passed the night without sleeping, and this had added to the restless fever created by the presence of a new and strange emotion ; she had enough on her mind to keep it inwardly engrossed, and blind and deaf to mere outward things. Not only had the dormant spirit of love, which the first sight of Hallam had germinated in her heart, been evoked to life and action by last night's meeting, but the depressing consciousness of a secret hung upon her. She did not know in what way, but she felt guilty ; there had never been open frank confidence between herself and her father, but till now she had never kept a positive secret from him.

Hester had none of her cousin Lucy's elasticity of temperament ; she had a different way of meeting trouble and discomfort ; she did not shrink from it, she rather met it half way, and then brooded over it ; she considered it carefully, turned it over on every side, and if she found it was inevitable sat down to bear it with Spartan fortitude. Lucy would shut her eyes to trouble as long as possible, acting on her favourite axiom that "every cloud has a silver lining !" she would try all expedients to avoid it, but never allow herself to "worry about it," as she said ; then when trouble really came, she bore it cheerfully, always maintaining that it was not half so bad as it might have been. But I am anticipating, for Lucy has had few trials as yet. For herself, and those around her, her plan was surely the happiest. If we dwell on a grievance, we are apt to examine it too accurately, and to take a magnifying glass to it as well.

The old servant's inquisitive look roused Hester now ; the new feeling born within her had affected her altogether—she no longer considered herself a child—and Biz's familiarity irritated her. Besides, what right had she to pry into her secret ? Hitherto she

had not had much opportunity, for on the previous evening Mr. Kirton had been at home, and during the early part of the morning Hester had avoided the kitchen and kept by herself; now she had brought her sewing there; but when Biz spoke to her, the calico had fallen in her lap and the left hand with it, while the right remained poised a brief instant, the needle-point upwards between thumb and finger, and then sank slowly to find its fellow.

Hester started and looked angrily at the old servant, and then went on with her sewing.

"You make too free, Biz; why don't you leave me alone?"

"Hightity—tightity!" said Biz; "one may know ye was out for a day's pleasuring yesterday, Muss Kirton; ye know folks allus says, 'children's scrow th' day after holiday making.'"

Hester only drew herself up proudly, and did not answer.

"Not to say as I'm surprised, so little pleasure as ye've knowed, poor child, only if ye'd be a little more like yerself, I've got something to tell 'ee as I'd be bound ye'd give yer ears to hear."

Hester coloured; she could not make up her mind to utter the "I don't care," on her lips: she knew what Biz had to tell, and felt she must and would hear it; how burdensome it was to be so tongue-tied!

Biz stood looking at her, smiling and pulling at each side of her own wrinkled cheeks with her doubled fists in an extraordinary manner.

Hester was confounded; she could not comprehend this pantomime.

But she still held her tongue, only she looked away from Biz and began to sew again.

"Well, some folks be dummell this morning; I thought, maybe, as ye'd met *him*, and knowed what I meant when ye turned so red just a bit ago; but it's plain you bean't, or ye'd ha' knowed what I was a-doing of."

"Why don't you speak plain, instead of making faces like an old owl?" said Hester, breaking bounds at last.

The old woman looked at her with a grim kind of smile; she was used to Hester's ways; but for the last year or so she had been more even-tempered than in her childish days.

"Well, ye be as scrow as two sticks be, and no mistake, Muss Heaster, and I'm a great mind not to tell 'ee my bit o' news."

Hester made a struggle against her pride. Biz's face looked fractious, and she could be as obstinate as a weak mule when she chose.

"Oh, news, is it? You should have said at the first you had news to tell, and then, perhaps, I'd have listened."

"Come, then, make a pleasant face and listen now, and maybe I'll tell 'ee; but ye aggrawated me, ye did, Muss, by looking as if ye didn't know who I meant just now. Why, there's only one gentleman as ye know as pulls out his whiskers for all a-world as if he was a-milking cows; they be rare uns to pull, that I grant ye, but I expects he hurts hisself maybe odd times."

"I suppose you mean Mr. Hallam?"

Hester could have struck her cheeks with anger as she felt the warm blood rushing there.

"Ay, ay, ye'll listen now fast enough, and ye'd best not stay me, for the muster, he'll be in in no time. Well, somewhere about six o'clock last evenin', I just took my walk down to the gate—ye know, child, I allus goes there afore I gets supper—and presently who should I see coming briskly up the lane, looking as fresh as new milk, but our young gentleman. He seemed quite pleased at the sight o' me, and I told him it was unlucky he had come just then, for the muster'd not been gone out five minutes. I wonder he hadn't met he. 'But where's yer young missus?' says he. I toud he ye was a-spending the day in Stedding town with a cousin ye had there of the name o' Wrenshaw, and what d'ye think he says next?"

"I don't know," said Hester, quietly.

"Why, he seemed in a caddle, and he pulled his whiskers as if he'd pull 'em off, and then he says, 'Is it a lady or a gentleman, this cousin?' So I toud he, and then he asked me a lot o' questions about you and Miss Lucy and her mother, and whether they was rich, and I don't know what all—he be's a rare 'un to talk—so I thought the best way was to send him where he'd be likely to find what he wanted, and I made a good guess ye'd ha' seen he, but I s'pose ye missed. I toud he as I warn't sure which road ye'd be coming—straight along, or through the Copse bit; that's where ye missed, I s'pose; it were a pity, it were, but what ye'd ha' seen he."

Kirton's entrance broke off Biz's talk, and she hastened to set the dinner, and, though Hester longed to hear more, she was almost glad to have some leisure to digest what she had been told.

Unfortunately, or, as it seemed to his daughter, of set purpose, Ralph Kirton was in an unusually chatty humour ; the truth was he had just sold two pigs for a much better price than he expected, and he had the money in his breeches pocket. He felt almost genial.

" Well, lass," he said, as he came in, " I've not met ye about farm all day, where hast been ? "

" I've been nowhere, father ; I'm sewing."

" Ye've had enough to do belike, chewing the cud of all the new-fangled notions ye got in Stedding yesterday. Well, Hester, d'ye like a town life as well as a country one ? "

" For some things better, and for others worse," said Hester, abruptly.

" But ye be so grave lately, lass. When I were talking to Lucy Wrenshaw, she smiled in my face and made me smile again. Come, cheer up ! I thought, maybe, giving you the outing might raise up your spirits a bit ; but ye look as grave as a judge and as dull as ditch water."

" I'm as God made me, father ; I don't know as I was ever different."

" Hold your tongue and come to dinner, if ye can't give me better answers." The farmer spoke angrily. " God never made any one who couldn't laugh when they chose."

Hester seated herself in proud silence ; a hundred answers burned and quivered on her lips ; but she shut her teeth tightly, and denied them passage. If her father called her silent, he might find her so, and make the best of it ; she wouldn't speak again till she was spoken to.

In a general way this might have gone on during dinner, and she might have had comfortable leisure for the dream in which she had been living since yesterday—not a dream of the future. Hester had memory stronger than imagination ; she had been going over and over greedily that little walk with Frederic Hallam ; before that, she had almost unconsciously worshipped him, but it was the remembrance of a dumb idol, for he had scarcely spoken to or looked at her. All he had said to Biz on his former visit had been duly repeated and treasured ; but now all was changed, the idol had spoken, had shown her that he—— Hester hesitated here. She longed to say loved ; but the idea of love between her and Frederic Hallam was too absurd ; and she shrank into herself as from the ridicule attached to such a thought. She might think he liked her ; he had himself asked her to recollect

him, and had said he wanted a friend; and yet Lucy thought Jacob Bonham loved her, and Mr. Hallam had looked just in the same kind of way; and at the remembrance of those looks, Hester's colour deepened and spread over face and forehead.

"Hester!" shouted her father, in his loud, rough tones. He had been watching her the last five minutes, with a frowning, wondering look. "Hester, what in life ails ye? are ye sick, or scared, or stupid, to sit there staring at the fire, and growing as pale as a turnip, and then as red as a poppy, and never a word spoken? I won't have it, I say, if ye're not sick. I won't have such behaviour." He brought his hand heavily down on the table.

Biz came quickly from the washhouse; a difference between this taciturn father and daughter was so rare as to excite her wonder, and she knew so well what Kirton's anger would be when fully roused, that she felt it necessary to hasten to Hester's succour.

"Go back to your work, Biz," said the farmer, roughly; "ye're not wanted here."

Biz retreated, grumbling and muttering: she would worry any one's life out as long as she could; but there was no daring about her; what she wanted in courage she usually made up in grumbles against the ill-usage of mankind, and specially of farmer Kirton.

Hester had risen from table, half sulky, half defying her father's anger.

"Are ye sick?" he said, in rather softened tones, for her colour flickered painfully.

Yes, she was sick; but she would not say so. Sick of that disease from which women rarely escape; which, however, is usually more evanescent in a strong, self-willed disposition than in a more timid and yielding one—usually, but not always. Her secret, too, was stifling her: she was always silent and thoughtful, hardly ever dreamy; and it was this change that had attracted Kirton's attention, for there was no mistaking the altered expression of her eyes.

The likeness between father and child was more marked than ever, as they looked at each other resolutely.

"No, I'm not sick," she said, at last.

"Then, it's all the worse," said her father, pushing away the dish from him, for they had just finished dinner when he noticed Hester's blush; "there's something or another going wrong with

ye, girl, and I'll get to the bottom of it; ye'd best tell me at once, or I'll find out without ye, maybe."

"Yes, there is something going wrong," said Hester, passionately: "I told you so, in the road, a week ago."

Ralph Kirton looked at her curiously; her passion surprised and quieted him, as emotion always does, in those with whom it is rare.

"Faith, wench, I believe I'd best take ye at your word."

"What do you mean, father?"

Hester was not silent now; her blood was rushing about too rapidly to permit the same strong curb she had hitherto maintained over tongue and action. She began to walk hurriedly up and down the kitchen."

"Are ye still in the same mind about your schooling?" he asked.

Hester stopped and looked bewildered.

It was new and strange to her to hide her secret wilfully; still, as long as silence would serve her, she could endure, but to frame deceit was loathsome, and yet it must be done now.

"You told me I shouldn't be happy at school."

"So I did, right enough;" he was rather pleased that his expressed opinion should have influenced her; "but if ye bean't happy here, ye'd be no worse off at school, maybe."

"No, I'll not go to school," said Hester, sadly.

Shame at herself had conquered her anger; she felt her father was the ill-used person now.

"Then if ye stay here, ye must come to your senses," said Kirton. "I'll not have these passions and flights one week, and this sulkiness and silence another. I thought if I gave ye a day's pleasuring, ye'd maybe be all the better for it; but it seems ye're worse, so you'd best bide at home, seeing it's no value to ye."

Hester's pride fought hard to be listened to; but she had tasted the unspeakable happiness and relief which change brings to a mind oppressed with its own monotony, and, with this added burden to bear, she knew she should need it more than ever.

"Father, I am thankful to you for letting me go to Stedding yesterday; and—and if I went there often, I think I should grow more cheerful like. I'm sure of one thing, if I'd seen as much of aunt Wrenshaw—I don't mean aunt Frank—as Lucy has it would ha' been better for me."

"Girls are no fit judges of what's good for them," said Kirton. "I never said I wanted ye different to what ye are when ye're

like yerself; but ye've not been yourself these days past. Let me have no more of it," and he strode out into the yard.

Biz waited till he was out of hearing, and then came into the kitchen full of grievance.

"The muster be put out to-day, that he be; I s'pose, maybe, he got out o' wrong side o' the bed the morning."

"Hold your tongue, Biz," exclaimed Hester, rousing out of the reverie in which her father's parting words had left her; "what business have you in the matter? Here, give me those crumbs; I want them for the chickens."

And she went out with the few crumbs the careful habits of Kirton's Farm occasioned on the dinner-cloth. Biz stood staring after her.

"Well, them's a pair on 'em this day as ever I set eyes on. They's in as nice a skin as a hedge-hog—there be no touching on 'em, they's so sharp. Ere-a-mussy! what some folk's tempers is! they doesn't know thayselfes, but they takes precious good care other folks does know. A pretty caddle I shall have with Muss Heaster now. Ah, the gals is all alike when the love fit's on 'em."

It was well the master was not by to witness the way Biz got rid of her feelings on the crockery, finally cooling herself by breaking a plate, at which she grumbled loudly for being so slippery.

CHAPTER XIII.

TWILIGHT MOMENTS.

THERE had evidently been something in the atmosphere of the previous evening detrimental to good temper. When Lucy Wrenshaw reached home, she was so snappish and contradictory, that her mother declared she was "as sour as—as, well—as a crab with its claws out."

This drew forth Lucy's indignant reproof, for she never allowed her mother's continual jumbles to pass uncorrected when alone with her.

"Well, child," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, "I always make that mistake, don't I? But I can't help it, it's all along o' your uncle Kirton. When he was first married, his wife, poor dear, was as frightened of him as ever she could stick, and he used to say she

walked like a crab, because she came into a room with one shoulder higher than the other, sideways like, and my husband used to say sometimes 'Well, if poor Janet is a crab, I know she's wed to a crab;' and so you see I get confused between the two."

"Mamma, you've told me that more than one hundred times. Oh, I am so tired, I've had to walk all the way home; I can hardly stand."

"Had to walk? Why, gracious me, Lucy! where's the chaise?" Mrs. Wrenshaw's wide mouth opened to its widest possibility.

"We've had an accident with one of the wheels; but Peter Stasson helped us home, and he says there's not much harm done."

The buzz of exclamations and questions that followed made Lucy feel crosser and more undutiful than ever; she said she really could not go through the whole story till she had had some supper, for that she was perfectly exhausted.

Angry as she felt with Jacob, she could not help sparing him as much as possible in narrating the accident. Her mother thought, however, that he must have been greatly to blame, and said she should tell him as much when she saw him. Lucy was in such a contradictory mood that this was a fresh offence; but she had the wisdom to be silent, and, making the excuse of extreme fatigue, escaped to her bedroom directly after supper.

She was angry with herself and with everybody. To think of Hester having a lover like that! She thought she was a very pretty girl, and *naïve* in some ways, and she always liked to have her good word; but she had set her down for an old maid; mewed up there at Kirton's Farm, who would ever have the chance of finding her out unless it should be any one she might see in Duke Street? Lucy had had her own little fears about introducing Mr. Bonham to her cousin; but Jacob's manner had soon set them at rest. She saw how Hester's abruptness jarred him, and although she wished him to like her in reason, she felt secretly pleased at his evident indifference to her society. Jacob was rising rapidly in her esteem, till Hester began to find fault with his driving. This acted adversely. Lucy had determined long ago that the man she chose for a husband should be a faultless hero, a paragon in whom no one—not even her cousin Hester—could find any defects, and for Jacob to subject himself to open interference! The accident completed her annoyance. She had been too proud of him before, not to feel shamed by his disgrace;

but still she had clung to the drive home alone, for, after all, his inattention had arisen from his devotion to her.

Her introduction to Mr. Hallam had changed all; he was just the hero she had dreamed of; he seemed to know exactly how to do, and when to say, everything necessary, and he was so handsome, and looked so sweet-tempered, and he was so evidently a gentleman. She blushed as she remembered the anxiety she had felt lest Jacob should advance to meet them, and thus be contrasted with this polished Londoner; and he had looked so earnestly at her as they parted. Of course she was not so silly as to think of him; but if her cousin Hester made such a match, why should not she make as good a one? But this last reflection did not render her any happier; it only served to show her how vain she was growing; and she was growing sleepy, too, and it would be far better not to think any more about it—at any rate, to-night.

Lucy was a much earlier riser than her mother, and she usually had an hour's pianoforte practice before Mrs. Wrenshaw came down to breakfast. The next morning, however, she could not settle to anything; she arranged some flowers which her cousin had brought her yesterday—a gift from Mrs. Stasson, for there was not such a luxury as a flower garden attached to Kirton's Farm. Hester had no passion for such an amusement, and her father considered that it would take too much of the men's time to keep it in order. These were just common sweet-smelling flowers, such as almost every cottager's garden contains; but Lucy had a taste of her own in such matters. She had not thrown away the ferns and leaves she had stooped to gather, while Hallam was bidding Hester good-by, and with their help she now arranged a pretty graceful nosegay for the breakfast table.

But still her mother did not come, and she stationed herself at the window. She had not been there five minutes before she turned away with a deep flush on her cheeks. Jacob Bonham had passed on the other side of the street, but without so much as looking across; in fact, he seemed to be walking along as carelessly and indifferently as possible. Well, let him; Lucy was quite sure she did not care: only, knowing how very tired she was on the previous evening, she thought he might just have knocked at the door and inquired for her; but how was he to be expected to know manners? Poor Jacob! his hold on Lucy's liking seemed uncertain.

The day wore away slowly and oppressively to Lucy, as days

always do when weighed down by our coming fate, for no important event in our lives comes upon us without some forerunner, some presentiment, if we did but watch for its warning.

Lucy's restlessness continued through the day, and she "mooned," as Mrs. Wrenshaw said, "to a degree." Some old gossiping neighbours came in to talk to her mother, and to lament over the accident to the carriage, while Lucy sat quiet, railing in her heart against the misery of living in a country town, where every little trifling action or misfortune becomes at once public property.

How could her mother encourage a pack of old maids who had nothing better to do than to chatter about other people's business, and make all manner of mischief by their tittle-tattle.

You see, Miss Wrenshaw was out of temper, and quite forgot (for she was a liberal-minded little soul at other times) that different people have, and must have, a perfect right to have different opinions, involving different sources of enjoyment, and that to some the discussion of their neighbours' affairs, the hearing of their friends' misfortunes, and perhaps failings (for we will not suppose for a moment the revelation of vice in others can give pleasure), affords intense gratification, difficult indeed to be understood by those whose more cultivated instincts thirst for more refined enjoyment.

At length, after one or two efforts at conversation, which sounded strangely more like repartee than replies, she quitted the room. As she went into her own "study," as she called it—a nook, or, in fact, a large closet with a window in it—her eyes fell on her hat and cloak, which she had thrown carelessly on the little table the night before, too tired or too dreamy to put them away.

But for the littered appearance these things gave, the study would have been a pretty little place. It was papered with a pretty light paper, matching that in her bedroom, with which it communicated, not by a door, but by a sliding framework, also covered with paper; this, to Lucy's imagination, at once made her study a romantic retreat; she felt a kind of heroine seated at her little table in a very uncomfortable high-backed chair which she had persuaded her mother to buy at a broker's, because she said it looked baronial; on one side were some small oaken bookshelves, filled with well-chosen volumes. After all, fond though she was of music, books were as yet the great passion of Lucy's life; she read them strangely though, generally dipping in at the

end, skimming the cream of the story or subject, but always after she had thus, in her mother's opinion, spoilt the interest, reading it diligently through without missing a word. On the other side of the room, facing the books, hung a few prints, neatly framed, and between the two sides, opposite the window, a basket was suspended, filled with dried grass and bulrushes, and other botanical curiosities. Lucy had plenty of intellectual pursuits, but as yet few useful ones.

Seeing her hat and cloak, she put them on almost mechanically, and having done this it seemed natural to go out. By the time she reached the street door, it appeared to her that she had always intended to take a walk to escape from the Miss Skippers' endless chatter.

One end of Duke Street led into the High Street, the other up towards the open country.

Instinctively she turned to the latter; she wanted quiet to enjoy her dreamy, "moony" mood in peace, not to have its cloud-like visions dispersed by the common-place talk of such chance acquaintance as she was likely to encounter in the High Street of Stedding.

As she went on, the houses gradually lessened in size, then for a short bit they ceased, long garden walls occupying each side of the road; presently began a row of straggling, dirty, but very picturesque cottages, with a low wall of piled-up stones in front, on which, for it was by this time late in the afternoon, lounged some of the owners of the dirty squalid little tenements, others leaning in front, while the children were playing about, or more often seated in twos and threes on the doorsteps.

Lucy passed quickly along; she wondered why she had chosen "Peg's Alley," as it was called, to walk through alone just at that time of day, for the people who inhabited it were mostly a low drunken set. However, she did not appear to attract much observation.

The houses came to an end, and the road began to ascend steeply; the banks on each side growing higher and higher, no longer grassy as they had been at first, but supported, as it seemed, by huge blocks of stone on one side, rich in varied colour, as the gleams of sunset reached them through the overhanging bushes at the top of the opposite bank. From among the fissures in the stones the wild clematis sprang in rampant luxuriance, and leaping up to gain the foliage above it, sometimes sat there triumphant in hoary beauty, but as often fell back in

clustering festoons, covered with blossoms and feathered seed-pods.

But at length the path, apparently tired of climbing, stopped its ascent, as if to take breath, and went along evenly for about a quarter of a mile, before it descended to its first level. Along this flat road, the banks were no longer high and rocky, but from the hedges grand old oaks and elm-trees spread their long arms quite across the road, and made a twilight streaked with golden gleams of light.

Lucy was roused from her dreams by the sudden gloom ; she thought it was time to return ; she wished she had not come that way ; there was a shorter path across the fields, but then it was lonesome, and she feared that worse than the rude remarks she might overhear in Peg's Alley.

As she stood hesitating, she saw a figure in the distance coming towards her ; her heart beat quickly, for she was far from any houses, and a gang of gipsies had recently passed through Stedding, leaving a thievish, evil name behind them.

She did not like to turn back and walk homewards, lest the gipsy—for it might be one—should come suddenly upon her, so she went on slowly to meet the advancing figure.

A few steps nearer, and her heart beat quicker still, and the warm blood seemed to steal softly and pleasantly through her veins.

In her relief that it was no gipsy, but one who would protect her even from the dreaded insolence of Peg's Alley, she had quite forgotten her quarrel with Jacob Bonham, and held out her hand cordially with a sweet smile.

He murmured some confused apology, but in so hurried and indistinct a manner, he might as well have left it unsaid, and Lucy was too happy just then to enter into any explanation or discussion. All her hopes and fears, and the worries of this long, tiresome day, seemed at rest—suffused, as it were, by that delicious, indolent, indescribable sensation, which before a woman has owned to herself that she loves, the presence of the beloved one produces, and which may be felt almost before she is quite aware of his presence, should that be unexpected.

With scarcely a word after the first greeting, they walked along side by side, Lucy with bent-down head and heightened colour, for she felt, without raising her eyes, how earnestly Jacob's were fixed on her. She was not angry with him now, she only longed to ask his forgiveness of her petulance, to show him in some way

how she valued his good opinion. She was glad of the twilight gloom of the trees : it wrapped all outward objects but these two in its mysterious atmosphere, and seemed to make them all in all to each other. She did not think this, she did not think at all, till the path grew lighter in front, and then she sighed, for they must soon emerge from under the shadow of those dear old overhanging trees, and she felt as if she could have walked on there for ever, beside Jacob Bonham.

The sweet spell seemed broken, too, for Jacob ; as the full sunset light streamed in upon them, he slackened his pace, and Lucy felt that at each step he drew nearer—closer to her. His breath was on her cheek ; and yet she had no power, perhaps no will, to move away ; her whole soul, her whole will, seemed suddenly bent to Jacob's, but the shrill railway whistle made itself heard, and they started asunder, as if at approaching footsteps.

Jacob had recovered himself in an instant ; the words that had been quivering on his tongue for some moments past, might still have been said, although they would have been said less passionately. But he had lost his opportunity ; the witching moment was over. Lucy was walking on faster now, her head erect,—just as she would have walked along the High Street of Stedding. She was angry with herself, and ashamed too ; feeling almost as if she had been making love to Jacob.

Her feelings reacted on his ; he became stiff and constrained, and began to talk hurriedly, and Lucy answered at random, almost with flippancy, so that by the time they reached Duke Street, they had made each other equally miserable. Lucy longed to ask him to come in, but her pride forbade it ; he evidently cared nothing at all for her, or he would have made some excuse to enter, and after her silliness under the oak-trees, what would he think if she gave him any more encouragement ?

Her cold good-by completed his disappointment, for his hopes had never been raised so high as in those few delicious twilight minutes, which he now saw had been the creation of his own fancy and vanity ; perhaps—and here Jacob started as if some one had shot him—when he had been noting the soft, loving expression of Lucy's eyes and mouth, and her conscious blushes, they had been caused by the remembrance of the stranger, the Londoner from whom he had seen her part yesterday evening.

It is not fair to take advantage of a moment of jealous fury, and record all the epithets which he applied to the contemptible cockney ; it was a relief to have some one to rail against instead

of Lucy, but he reached home in a most unamiable frame of mind.

Lucy was even more to be pitied, for she had no one to blame but herself; and self is such an obtrusive, uneasy culprit, you can't quiet him—as fast as you stroke down one of his porcupine's quills, another sticks out and pricks, until you bestow some attention on it. The only possible ways of getting relief are either to maintain sufficient self-complacency to be always right, and so tough-proof against the quills, or else to admit humbly that you are quite wrong, and likely from your exceeding silliness often to be so again; but as this last plan is very unpalatable, and probably impossible to weak female nature, Lucy could not manage it, and came down to join her mother in the drawing-room—as she persisted in calling it, although Mrs. Wrenshaw always forgot and designated it “the parlour”—disposed to be cross to everybody.

Her mother was not there; but Rachel, hearing Miss Lucy's step, came and told her that the mistress had gone out to take a turn with the Miss Skippers, and had left word she should be in soon.

“But here be a letter, miss, as is come for you since the mistress stepped out.”

Lucy took it up listlessly; her usual correspondents were one or two among her schoolfellows and her aunt, Mrs. Wrenshaw. Just now she was not in a mood to care for a letter from any one, or to speculate on the address being in an unknown handwriting. Indeed, she scarcely remarked this as she opened the envelope; but then she saw that it was a man's writing, and, turning to the second page, there was, in a bold legible hand, the signature, “Frederic Hallam.”

Her attention was aroused now; her hands trembled, and her face flushed with excitement; the words seemed to dance on the page.

She read the letter carefully once, and her face was not nearly so radiant as when first she saw “Frederic Hallam” at the end of it.

She read it through again, and now she looked decidedly annoyed, and crushed the letter angrily into her pocket.

It was a courteous, well-expressed letter, full of indirect compliments to Lucy; but it was a request in so many words, with no disguise about it, to be allowed to write to Miss Wrenshaw, and through her to correspond with her cousin Hester.

Her first impulse was to tell her mother ; but she feared she would never keep it to herself, and it was not fair to publish Hester's secret, for Lucy felt pretty sure, from what he had said, that Mr. Hallam's presence on the previous evening would be kept a secret at Kirton's Farm. And besides, what was the use of consulting any one ? Her uncle Kirton was hard and miserly, but he was Hester's father, and Lucy had no right to receive letters for her cousin which were to be kept from his knowledge, even if Hester herself approved of anything so deceitful ; and Lucy felt sure this would not be the case.

No, she should not take any time to consider it, she should write her refusal at once. It was very painful to write to a stranger without telling her mother ; but what could she do ? Afterwards she would tell Hester, and warn her that she feared Mr. Hallam was neither open nor to be trusted. "How dare he," thought Lucy to herself, "make a cat's-paw of me indeed !"

Why should Mr. Hallam be so underhand in his mode of wooing ? Lucy liked romance ; but she was sharp enough to know that Hester might be running into danger if she corresponded with a man in a higher station than her own without her father's knowledge. Though she was so strong-minded, she did not know the world and its ways as well as she did ; and Lucy could not help feeling a little pride that she could be useful in advising her cousin in a matter of this kind.

CHAPTER XIV.

FREDERICK HALLAM DRINKS TEA WITH HIS AUNT.

"I'm very sorry to be late, aunt," Frederic Hallam pulled at one of his whiskers diligently while he spoke, "but I had a particular engagement this afternoon."

"Yes," said his aunt, decidedly, but not crossly ; she could rarely be cross to Fred ; "you had a particular engagement to be here at half-past five o'clock, and now," looking at her handsome gold watch, "it's nearly seven."

"By Jove, seven ! how my watch must have lost !" he drew it forth to compare it with his aunt's, but seeing it wanted only six minutes to the hour, he pocketed it again without comment.

"I'm really sorry to have kept you waiting so long for your tea, why not have had it without me?"

"What? when you said you'd dine early on purpose; that would have been polite would it not? How's your mamma?"

"She's not very well to-day; so much languor and debility about her, she says."

"Fiddle!" said his aunt; then, seeing him look annoyed, "what I mean, Fred, is, that your mother would do well enough, if she'd only not think about her health; just look at me; I'm always well, just because I have no time to think about myself. Such nonsense and fancies!"

Hallam smiled; he did not want to vex his aunt this evening, and he knew this was an old grievance. She had excellent health, and consequently uniformly good spirits herself; and she would not believe in her sister-in-law's ailments, and what Martha Hallam did not choose to believe in, as a matter of course had no real existence at all.

But as Fred let the subject drop, she had no excuse for continuing it, and began to pour out tea in a flutter of hospitality that was pleasant to witness.

The little drawing-room, although somewhat too prim in its arrangements, and smart in its colouring for good taste, was the perfection of neatness and brightness—the pretty old china and silver tea equipage making the centre of the picture.

Even for her beloved nephew, except on high days and holidays, she would not derange the comfort and order of her establishment by a late dinner-hour. So when she asked him, as she did on this occasion, to tea, she bade him dine early, and then he should have something to eat more solid than bread and butter. She had a bird-like appetite herself, and although the little dish of eggs and the tiny cold tongue looked tempting and nice, perhaps it was fortunate that Hallam had not dined at one o'clock, or he might have astonished his aunt's repast by, like the little bear in the story book, "eating it all up."

Miss Hallam tried in an indirect manner to discover the secret of his country journey; but it was not easy to find out anything that Frederick Hallam did not choose to tell; his perfect good temper and matchless assurance giving him double advantage in an encounter of wits. But at last, finding her unusually persevering, he abruptly changed the conversation.

"By-the-by, aunt Martha, I do wish you would call on those poor Miss Goldsmiths."

Miss Hallam looked aghast ; she could not be angry with Fred, but her indignation at such an outrageous proposal must explode somewhere.

"No, Fred, no," she said in her shortest, driest voice ; "you know I'm not fond of new acquaintances."

"Now, aunt Martha, that's what you just are, and it's because you are so kind to and fond of a new acquaintance, that I ask you to call on my friends ; why, you'll do them all the good in the world."

Fred was too discreet to add, what was commonly reported among his aunt's friends, that she had always some pet family or person on hand to whom she devoted herself incessantly until they gave her cause of offence, and then she turned to some one else for a while, perhaps a year or so, at the end of which time some former cast-off pets would be taken into favour again. To a certain extent she was right in saying she did not seek new acquaintance ; she was so continually estranging old ones, that she was always having to begin over again.

"Very likely I might," she said now, in reply to her nephew ; "but I don't want to."

"Not want to do good ! what an extraordinary assertion, when you know you are the most benevolent creature going."

He was obliged to look away, as he offered this large sugar-plum ; for the conceited wriggle with which his aunt had said the last words amused him as much as it would have annoyed a less good-tempered person.

"I've plenty of friends, Fred, and I don't see the use of running after strangers. The Miss Goldsmiths are very good sort of people, no doubt ; but, as I said before, I have plenty of friends of my own."

"Well, but now look here ; it's just because you have so many friends of your own, that you should take pity on these two poor ladies who have so few, and who are really anxious to know you."

"Ladies !" Martha Hallam tossed her head and wriggled again in a most irritating manner. She had the annoying habit peculiar to some women of never being perfectly still ; she must surely have fidgeted or twitched even in her sleep. "I can't call such a pair of old-fashioned-looking goodies, ladies ;" then seeing Hallam look grave, "I beg your pardon, Fred ; I forgot they were your friends."

"Ah ! I see where the shoe pinches," he said ; "you think

they are snobs ; and do you know, aunt Martha, I always till now thought you superior to women's little-mindedness on these matters ? ”

Miss Hallam settled her flounces and looked red and flurried, the reproof and the compliments were so mingled ; she was in secret awe of her nephew, and set the greatest value on his good opinion, but it did not seem the thing for him to lecture her on conduct.

“ No, Frederic, I am not aware that I am in any way prejudiced or narrow-minded—quite the contrary ; but I was born and bred a High Churchwoman, on true Conservative principles about everything, and I never have associated with any one professing any different principles ; ”—she stiffened her backbone to its straightest perpendicular—“ I'm not going to begin now.”

“ Oh, aunt, aunt ! and just because these good women—for they are good women—go to a different church, you'll have nothing to say to them.”

“ Not if I know it,” said Miss Hallam, decidedly.

Fred leaned back in his chair and whistled softly ; he was as much vexed with his aunt as he had ever been in his life ; but he had two points to carry this evening. You probably understand him well enough by this time to be perfectly aware that he did not sacrifice a whole evening solely and wholly to please his aunt ; no, he had “ other fish to fry,” and, therefore, he forbore to urge her, knowing by past experience that her amount of contradiction was unfathomable.

Some of her words, however, although he had often heard her utter such sentiments before, had roused a new train of thought, and he sat playing with his watch-chain, and lounging in the most comfortable chair in the room, while his aunt, after sending away the tea-things, spread out a huge piece of worsted work, at which she had been employed the last five or six years.

Her nephew sat thinking about Hester, and his recent interview with her. She had looked prettier than ever ; but, alas ! her manner of speaking and awkward bearing still offended his ear and eye. He wished she were more like her cousin—there would be little trouble, he thought, in polishing that ready-witted, frank-spoken girl into anything he wanted ; she had no *gaucherie* about her, the very movement of her elbows was different to Hester's ; but the correspondence would effect much. He should tell Hester everything he wished her to learn or to do ; he did not care about a clever or accomplished wife, but he would take good care not to

marry one who might bring him into ridicule. There was plenty of good material to work upon, he felt sure; he had time enough before him—time enough, no!—and then the remembrance of dunning creditors and pressing claims made him feel as if he could not wait patiently for Ralph Kirton's death. He never thought there would be any opposition from Hester.

Something whispered him to keep off the subject with his aunt, and yet, like a moth round the flame, he hovered near it, so near that at last, in the midst of a desultory talk about commonplaces, he said, abruptly, "I wonder if that piece of worsted work will be finished by the time I marry?"

"Marry!" She dropped the shade of wool she had just selected from her basket. "You don't mean to say, Fred, you are thinking of marrying?"

"No, I don't say that I am, but if I did I suppose there would be no harm done, would there?"

She looked still more surprised.

"Harm! of course not; nobody said there would be any harm; but you are very young, Fred, to be encumbering yourself with a wife and family, unless—the lady has money or first-rate family."

"There you go," said Hallam, laughing. "I never saw anything like you women; you build such castles on a slight observation. Don't you frighten yourself, aunt—if ever I do marry, it will be for money; if I do make such a sacrifice of myself, it shall be for something worth having."

But she shook her head.

"No, Fred, there you would be quite wrong; no mercenary marriage ever prospers; there's no blessing on it to begin with; but I know you are only joking, my dear boy," for she saw he had turned away impatiently; "you're getting into some little difficulties, or you would not talk of marrying only for money."

"I'm not getting into them, because I'm never out of them—how can I be with my income? But now, joking apart, instead of this perpetual worry and borrowing and troubling my friends, if I could find some quiet, plain-faced, sensible girl, with lots of tin, don't you think I might do worse?"

His manner puzzled her; she would not believe him in earnest, although it sounded strangely like it, but Miss Hallam rarely took the trouble to reflect; she considered herself too sharp to require it.

"Do worse? I should think so; of all people, Frederic, you

must not marry an ugly wife, or one you don't love. You know I can't endure ugly people ; I have never been used to them."

"But you must be reasonable, aunt: you cannot possibly expect me, having no money of my own, to find everything in a wife. Suppose now, just for argument's sake, I pick up some pretty country girl with a fortune large enough to cover her want of breeding, what would you say to that?"

"No fortune can cover want of breeding," exclaimed Martha Hallam, getting excited; "but I know you are only joking, Fred, or I don't know what would become of me: the idea of you married to anybody beneath you! I don't want to make you vain—you are a Hallam, and therefore you have a right to good looks—but I can't see why your wife should not be well-born and rich as well as pretty. But now, my dear boy, tell me about these difficulties."

And then the real business of the evening began, and before Frederic Hallam bade his aunt good-night his heart was considerably lightened; she had supplied him with the means of paying the most pressing of his creditors, who, during the last few days, had been behaving so badly that they had made him contemplate the expediency of a temporary residence abroad, unless matters could be precipitated with Hester Kirton. It was unlucky that he had failed about the Miss Goldsmiths; he knew a little notice from his aunt would have pleased them greatly; however, he would try again.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SECRET PRESSES.

"THE mother of mischief is no bigger than a midge's wing," says the proverb; and thus it came to pass that this first little deceit had so warped Hester's perceptions, that she could not agree with the view Lucy took of the clandestine correspondence. It might be that the total want of open dealing between herself and her father had rendered her independent of his control in matters of opinion. Any way, she was displeased with her cousin for what she had done, and she showed it.

Poor Lucy felt very sorry. Ready as she was in speech, she was usually undecided in judgment when it had to be acted on; she always consulted others, either her mother or her aunt, about

her undertakings and pursuits, and although in her impulsive way she had said to herself at first that she should write and refuse Hallam's request, still when it came to be done, she felt dismayed and uncertain, not about the right or wrong of the matter, but at the awful responsibility of doing anything so decided, unknown to any one else.

Besides, it was the first secret she had kept from her mother; and she loved her dearly, spite of her occasional pertness to her. This weighed on her spirits, and she felt heavy-hearted too on account of Jacob Bonham; and now she had ridden Bob over a few days after the receipt of the letter, to show it to Hester, and to tell her how she had replied to him, and her cousin's hardness made her feel as if she had been guilty of evil dealing towards her.

"At any rate, you might have asked me first what I wished done," said Hester.

"I did not think of that," said Lucy. In her heart she felt that her cousin's opinion could not have changed her mode of action in a matter of simple right and wrong; but then this did not shape itself directly, and even if it had, she would have been afraid of provoking a rude answer. Yet when she reached home again, she felt she had acted like a coward. What was the use of being Hester's friend if she dared not tell her the truth? How she longed to be as out-spoken as Hester herself, only she wished she would not be so hard.

Hard! Hester felt like a tempest after Lucy had left her. She had insisted on keeping the letter, and Lucy set no value on it, and so gave it to her. What a nice letter it was, thought the poor girl, as she read it and re-read it; and she might, perhaps, have received such a letter once a week—maybe oftener—if Lucy had not been so silly and disobliging. Hester could not understand her reason. Lucy, who was always talking about love-stories and nonsense—she should have thought it just the very thing she would have entered into. She sat half the afternoon musing over it. Biz was in the dairy superintending the churning, too busy to offer much disturbance to her young mistress's train of thought. Suddenly a light flashed on her dark perplexity. Her keen observation had noted Lucy's annoyance at Mr. Bonham's carelessness, and she had also remarked her eagerness to speak to Mr. Hallam. It was plain now; Lucy was jealous that Hester should have so grand and handsome an admirer, and would not lend a hand in the matter. For an instant Hester's

strong will roused itself, and she felt almost determined to set aside Lucy's opposition, and answer the letter herself; but no, she could not do that—the modesty of her nature recoiled at the thought; it would be owning that she cared for Hallam before he had openly professed affection for her; and a warning voice whispered that the friendship he had spoken of might not mean any warmer feeling. But then why want to write to her? He must care for her. So she sat still, facing the fire, spite of the warm evening; her elbows planted on her knees, and her slender hands forming a resting-place for the soft chin. Hallam's letter to Lucy lay in her lap, disregarded for the present, as she mused over her cousin's evident jealousy.

After all, perhaps Lucy's refusal was a thing to be rejoiced at. She wrote nice interesting letters, Hester knew, very different to her own stiff, laboured compositions, which made her ears burn and her fingers ache before they were concluded to her satisfaction; while Lucy could sit down and write a note off in a few minutes, and laugh and talk while she was doing it. Suppose Mr. Hallam had found her the most amusing correspondent of the two, and had transferred his friendship—Hester did not like to call it anything else—to her cousin?

A slight noise behind her made her start, and squeeze the letter up in her hand; she looked round hastily; no one was in sight, but she heard a sound of clearance in the dairy which made her sure Biz would soon be making preparations for tea. So she smoothed the letter carefully with her hand, folded it up, and was just slipping it into her pocket, when her father entered the kitchen, so noiselessly and suddenly that she almost dropped the letter with the start she gave.

He cast a keen, suspicious look at her.

“What be you cramming into your pocket, lass, that way?”

“Only a letter I had from Lucy, father,” and Hester blushed at her unaccustomed deceit; her pride revolted from such a meanness.

Kirton had a great mind to ask for the letter, but just then Biz came in, scolding and grumbling, “There was not half so much butter as there might ha' been. She couldn't think how 'twas. When she was a gal, she worked with a will, but it seemed, it did, as if gals' arms now-a-days was too tender for handling churns. They'll be a gotten a machine next, I reckon. I should like to know whatever 'll come on all the live men and women when the whole world's moved by machines.”

"You're talking nonsense, Biz," said Hester, who always stopped the grumbling when she could. "Machines can't go by themselves; they want a many hands to guide them."

"Ugh! I can't abear new-fangled ways, not I. What the gals is made of now-a-days is past my belief,—made o' petticoats mostly, I lay. There bean't a mossel of strength in their arms. Dress, dress, dress, that's all their cry; if it served 'em for summut to eat, I'd think less about it, maybe. But there's that Faith Stasson, she eats her head off whenever she comes nigh the place to do a cast o' dairy work. She's made a clean dish o' that cold bacon, and no mistake, and me counting on it for to-morrow's dinner."

Mr. Kirton had left the kitchen while tea was getting ready, but he caught her last words as he now came back.

"The bacon ate up! That was more your fault than hers, Biz," he said, sternly. "I'll have you do your own churning, if ye can't manage a strip of a girl like that. She couldn't have ate it, neither; maybe she took it home to her mother."

Hester rose at his last words. She considered the Stassons her special property, and she would not hear them unjustly accused.

"Father, how can you say such a thing? Why, Faith's as honest as I am myself."

"Maybe she is," said Kirton. It was strange that, hard and stern as he was, he exacted slight respect or deference from his child—perhaps from the consciousness of how little fatherly tenderness he had shown her; so true is it, that coldness and indifference never engender reverence. "But," he continued, "I wouldn't be fain to answer for your honesty, Hester, if ye had a sickly mother and hungry brothers at home."

Formerly Hester would have tossed her head at this reproof, now the dishonest weight of her secret kept her humble.

Her father looked hard at her, but said nothing. He stood silently before the fire, and then he called out, "Biz! there's that room betwixt mine and Hester's, that hasn't been slept in lately; can you redd it up without much firing and waste?"

"What, the best room!" exclaimed Biz. "Ere-a-mussy, it 'ood take a week's airing, that it 'ood, afore a body 'ood sleep in it safe."

"Safe!" Kirton sneered. "Look you here, Biz! Hester has set her heart on having Mrs. Wrenshaw here, and I'm in a mind not to balk her for a day or so's visit; but, look you, I'll

have no firing and thriftless ways. Carry a pan o' coals through the room and pass it thro' the bed, and welcome, only not too much o' that; they'll cost enough when they do come. They're asked for Monday."

He turned abruptly and went out of the kitchen, leaving his hearers thunderstruck.

Visitors at Kirton's Farm! Why, such an event had never been dreamed of since Hester's birth, except when Mrs. Wrenshaw had volunteered a two days' visit on the occasion of her niece's going to school, to see, as she said, that the poor child was not sent there in rags.

Their wonder would have been lessened if they had known that it had occurred to Farmer Kirton that Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw were not growing younger, and had no children, and would have a little property to leave; and he began to think after his talk with Hester, that, as Mrs. Wrenshaw was her godmother, it would be more natural for her to inherit this property than her cousin Lucy.

The day Kirton had dined in Stedding, Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw had mentioned her intention of asking her brother-in-law and his wife to pay them a visit before winter set in. He disliked Lucy's mother without understanding her; probably our dislikes would be much fewer if we took more trouble to understand each other's springs of action and words—and he had made up his mind that she was a grasping woman, eager to secure all she could for her own and Lucy's advantage. "Ill-doers" ever are, and ever were, "ill-deemers."

He had pondered the matter deeply. The idea of asking them to Kirton's Farm presented itself, but was quickly rejected as impossible: he shivered as he thought of the extra tea and sugar, and bread and meat that must be consumed; it would be wanton, lawless expenditure in which he had no right to indulge. Still he was haunted by the unpleasant thought that Mrs. Frank, through her manœuvring, might secure for Lucy a snug little income which would otherwise have been Hester's.

In the midst of his perplexity he received Mr. Goldsmith's reply to the letter he had written about Hester's wish for schooling.

His friend strongly deprecated such a plan, and proposed that her father should try to make her home happier for her by a little cheerful society there; "staid sensible people, however," wrote Goldsmith, "not a pack of boys and girls to fill her head with nonsense."

This was agonizing: he was brought to the brink, but he had still no courage to take the plunge. The items of the Wrenshaw's daily consumption swelled and grew, till his sleep was haunted by visions of gigantic loaves and quarters of mutton—for he knew he dared not feed them entirely on bacon—rushing tumultuously from the kitchen, away and out of sight and recovery, followed by the flocking cocks and hens, most of which seemed to have had their necks wrung.

Next morning's post brought a letter from Mrs. Wrenshaw. She told Mr. Kirton that she and her husband hoped soon to be at Stedding for a few days, and that, as they should not have time to see much of Hester, they hoped he would spare her to them when they returned home.

He had no occasion to ponder over this letter; he took it into his little study, and seated himself to answer it. "A likely matter he'd trust Hester away, and in London, too, where were lots o' smart chaps as would be taking a fancy to her; there would be the saving of her keep, that was something; but he should lose her help in the farm and house, and then she'd want a rare rig o' gowns and such like; no, the only safety for Hester was to let her bide at home out o' the way o' the men."

And having written a decided but carefully-worded refusal to Mrs. Wrenshaw's invitation, he made a fresh calculation of the household expenses of entertaining her and her husband there for a couple of days and nights, and, with much inward repugnance, decided that, if next morning he thought well of it, they should be asked in the face of all risk to Kirton's Farm, for it seemed to his calculating brain that, if he gave them offence now by wilfully alienating them from Hester, he should be playing Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw's own game for her with a vengeance.

The bread-and-mutton visions apparently did not disturb his night's rest, and we have seen the determination he had arrived at, to the utter bewilderment of Biz and even to the great surprise of calm, collected Hester.

"Ere-a-mussy me! the world must be a-spinning round too fast, I'm thinking, and addlin' some folks' brains." Biz had occasionally a shrill, spiteful way of laughing at her master behind his back, her revenge for the abject submission she usually maintained towards him. "To think o' the muster askin' visitors! you'll excuse me, Muss Heaster," and, laughing still, she sat down and wiped her face with her apron, as if quite overcome by the intensity of the joke.

"I don't see anything absurd. I'm pleased aunt Wrenshaw's coming; ain't you pleased, Biz?"

This was asked rather defiantly, as if she thought the old woman ought to be pleased at what so rejoiced her, and Biz's contradiction was immediately roused.

"Pleased! yes, no doubt but what ye are pleased, ye as has got nothin' to do but sit and make things pleasant to yer friends when they comes; ye never thinks o' the extra plates and cups to wash and the rest o' it; but some folks don't care how much thay put upon an old woman, not thay."

"You're talking nonsense, Biz," said Hester, decidedly. "You know very well I shall help wash up, and I shall do all the extra bedroom work myself."

"And it's like enough I shall let 'ee," said the old woman, crossly. "A nice thing for Mrs. Wrenshaw to go to Stedding and see Miss Lucy a-sittin' up at her music, a-playin' and a-singin', and then come here and find 'ee a-doin' housemaid's work, with yer frock, maybe, pinned up in front o' 'ee! No, Muss Heaster, ye must behave like a born lady while yer aunt's here, if ye means her to ask 'ee back."

Hester coloured crimson; everything in this speech jarred upon her pride and her jealousy of Lucy, for, although she did not know it, she was very jealous of her; but she was too proud to answer, and stood as if she had not heard, while Biz went on grumbling.

"Pan o' coals, indeed! I'd like to see the pan o' coals as 'ood warm a room as hasn't been slep in six year and more. It ought to be fresh whitewashed, it ought; but I'm thinkin' the muster 'ood go right crazy if he was to see I making a work about it, and he'd be sure to smell it out. There's some oud hangings in the press, if the moth's not eaten 'em right out, might serve; but there should be a fire in the chimney, if ye don't want yer aunt to get her death there; she'll catch her bones full o' rheumatics as it be."

"Then there must be a good fire," said Hester, decidedly; "I shall tell father so: best not ask aunt at all, than do her a mischief when she comes."

Her heart swelled as she thought how differently Lucy would be allowed to welcome her visitors.

"Then ye'll take it on yer own shoulders 'bout the fire?" said Biz, who, to do her justice, was hospitable at the bottom of her heart, although the enforced habit of pinching and screwing for so

many years had given her miserly habits, which came more naturally on first thoughts than her real nature. "A good fire there ought to be, and that's for certain."

But she hushed as her master's stealthy step again approached the kitchen, and bustled forward with the tea—not before she needed, for Ralph Kirton indulged in a sort of homily on waste of time and words, as he stood with his back to the fire; which she knew very well was meant for her, although she did not choose to appropriate it.

"Blame being," as she remarked to herself, when she was safe in the washhouse, "the only thing the muster's freehanded wi', and that he do fling about broadcast like the grain, he do. It's a lucky job for I, t'ain't in natur like the grain; it don't grow, that's one comfort; and he's mostly so silent, that maybe if he didn't scold a bit here and there, his tongue 'ood rust for want o' waggin'." 'Soft words butter no parsnips;' and for sure hard uns break no bones."

CHAPTER XVI.

AN EVENING AT MRS. FRANK WRENSHAW'S.

By the following Monday Hester and Biz had contrived to make the best room somewhat habitable; but Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw's visit was deferred for a day.

They had arrived at Stedding on the previous Friday, and it was settled by Mrs. Frank that she would spare them for a couple of days at Kirton's Farm, on condition that Hester came over with her father to tea on this Monday evening, and drove the Wrenshaws back with them in the pony-carriage, which had been mended in anticipation of the visitors.

Ralph Kirton growled and refused to go; but he said Hester could do as she pleased.

Mr. Wrenshaw was a handsome old man; spite of care and sorrow, and he had known both, his face only spoke of brightness and benevolence. His wife looked more careworn, but there was a sweet resigned look mingled with the calm sensible expression, more interesting than the mere commonplace prettiness of her sister-in-law, Mrs. Frank. They were childless now, but they had not always been so.

They both warmly welcomed Hester, although they said they

should not have known her; and her uncle paid her some courteous, old-fashioned compliments on her improved looks.

Hester said her father would expect them early, so they must not stay supper; and, after a due amount of lamentation on this head from Mrs. Frank, she made a compromise and gave them what she called "a solid tea," which many people would have pronounced a dinner.

To Lucy's dismay, her mother announced, just as they were sitting down to table, that she had met Mr. Bonham in the morning, and, as she thought it would be quite stupid for Mr. Wrenshaw to sit down among so many ladies, she had asked the young doctor in to make even numbers.

No words had passed between Lucy and her mother on the subject of Mr. Bonham; they had both been so busy preparing for their visitors, that nothing but their arrival had been talked about. But perhaps Mrs. Frank had guessed that there was something wrong, as Jacob had never appeared in Duke Street since the accident to the pony-carriage; or, seeing his dull looks when she met him for the first time that morning, she might have fancied that the dread of her displeasure was keeping him away. Mrs. Frank was so apt to take up extravagant and romantic notions, and to attribute entirely wrong motives to people, that it might be dangerous to say exactly what she thought about Bonham on this particular morning. What she did was another matter, as she spoke so loud as to be audible to many of the inhabitants of Stedding, when she asked the young doctor to join what she called a very select tea-party.

"My London relatives," said Mrs. Frank, with an air—for, although she was not proud, she liked it to be known that she *had* London relatives; independent gentlefolks too—ever since Mr. Wrenshaw had given up business and lived on his little property.

Mr. Jacob Bonham bowed, and said he should be most happy, and he looked as if he should while he spoke; and then, as soon as he had gone on his way, he reproached himself for his weak folly, when he had resolved to see as little of Lucy as possible, for he had sorrowfully made up his mind she was engaged to that London puppy, spite of her soft looks in those twilight moments under the oak-trees.

Well, he must go now; he had promised and he never broke his word; but it should be the last time; he would speak to and look at her as little as possible, and with visitors present there

would be no risk of being left together ; that he could not endure, he knew.

His heart throbbed painfully when he found himself on the threshold where he had last parted from Lucy. Why was he going to inflict this torture on himself, to see the sweet face which could never be his, perhaps to receive again the sweet soft smiles he had so fatally misinterpreted ? He could only hope she might be in one of her saucy moods, and yet then she looked to his fancy prettier than ever.

She had been rather quiet and dull after her mother's announcement ; but directly the young doctor appeared she flushed up into an excited gaiety, which struck her quiet observant aunt as being forced and unnatural. Her uncle aided her, however, and they went on joking and laughing, till poor Jacob was thoroughly convinced, if he had any doubt before, that Lucy did not care two straws about him.

It was very bitter, but he would try to keep the promise he had made to himself ; Lucy need not fear he would persecute her with his attentions.

He also became excited and talked a good deal to Mrs. Wrenshaw, and as Hester was sitting beside her aunt she was soon included in the conversation. She did not feel so shy of him now. That unlucky tumble had done much to dissipate the reverence she had previously felt for the doctor of Stedding, and Hester had a peculiarity common to both weak and strong-minded women : if she once felt herself in any way a man's superior, she entertained a slight contempt for him ever after ; and superiority, either real or fancied—one answers as well as the other—always gives a certain amount of self-possession.

She had a feeling of pity for him, too, on this evening ; she had not forgiven Lucy. Hester had never had much to forgive hitherto ; so perhaps she was not practised in the virtue ; it seemed to her as if it were not possible she could forget her cousin's mismanagement, and when people are intolerant, they are apt to think it is because they have good memories.

And now, besides ill-using her, Lucy was behaving with strange caprice to Mr. Bonham. What she had herself told her, and the foolish way in which she had encouraged his inattention to the pony, and many other things she had noted during their drive, had assured her that her cousin cared for the young doctor ; but this evening she did not seem to be even kind to him ; she had frowned when Mrs. Frank said she expected him to tea.

Hester thought she, too, well knew why ; and she began to tremble, as a new fear suddenly dawned. Suppose Lucy were corresponding with Mr. Hallam on her own account, telling her own version of her cousin's silence. But, although suspicious, partly perhaps by nature, but mostly from evil example, she was too just to give such a thought room to grow in ; and, as she looked up at Lucy's open, frank face, it was impossible not to reject it. Still, she was behaving unkindly to Mr. Bonham, and therefore Hester made unusual efforts to be civil to him.

One reason for this might have been that she was extremely anxious aunt Wrenshaw should not think her shy and awkward ; she was her godmother, and therefore far more her property than Lucy's, and, although Hester was not vain, she was proud, and shrank from being despised.

"I hope you weren't much hurt the other night, Mr. Bonham ? " she said presently, to the young doctor.

He looked up quickly, thinking what a harsh, unpleasant voice she had.

"Not at all, thank you," and then he became red and dignified, and stuffed his hands into his pockets, and Hester felt in a moment that she had made a mistake.

Lucy turned round sharply. What could Hester find to say to Jacob ? She began to think she should speak to him herself, and then she saw his ungraceful attitude. She turned away with almost a groan. No, it was impossible ; she could not really care for a man who was so uncouth in some ways as Jacob. The coloured trousers were bad enough, when he was asked to meet Londoners, too ; why, uncle Wrenshaw had put on his dress suit, —but to cram his hands in the pockets and stand there looking red and foolish—she could have shaken him for doing himself so little justice.

"You must come and see us when you visit London, sir," said Mr. Wrenshaw.

"I shall be most happy to do so : I have been thinking lately of leaving Stedding, and trying to get a London practice."

"Bless me !" exclaimed Mrs. Frank, with open eyes and mouth, "you don't mean it, Mr. Bonham ; I thought you were getting on so nicely. Why, what would Stedding do without you ? it would be like a cart without a horse ; like my carriage without my pony." She was fond of talking of her carriage, few of her neighbours could boast such an appendage. "Bless me ! I'm always making mistakes ; I'm sure I'm quite sorry ; I meant

nothing about the accident; I assure you, I spoke quite as it came."

Jacob flourished his pocket-handkerchief, and thereby partly hid his nervousness; but this second allusion to the hateful accident was trying.

He was surprised to be again addressed by Hester, to whom London seemed a sort of paradise now.

"When are you going, and where shall you live?"

She spoke as if she had known him for years, with no womanish effort at pleasing, without even a smile upon her lips, and he replied in the same tone, more as if he were speaking to a man.

"I have not made up my mind on either subject—circumstances will govern me."

He could not help stealing a look at Lucy; but she had turned away, and was apparently seeking for some music. Either the exertion of stooping or some other cause had flushed her throat deeply. Jacob felt a sudden gleam of hope; but when he went up to the piano to see if he could be of any use, she refused his assistance so ungraciously, without so much as turning round her head, that he shrank away confounded at his own forgetful folly. Ah, Jacob! was it likely Lucy would let you see the tears which your sudden news had sent brimming to her eyes?

The evening was going flatly, as was natural when three out of the six persons present misunderstood each other; for poor Lucy had not been at all able to discover what had caused Hester's stiff manner towards her; too light-hearted herself to bear malice, she did not dream of it in her cousin.

The restraint seemed to Mrs. Frank a tacit reproach to her powers as entertainer. She always liked people to be at full pitch of merriment, or she fancied they were dull.

"Don't you think we're too quiet?" she whispered to Mrs. Wrenshaw. "Suppose we try a round game," she added, aloud; "we can pull down the blinds, you know, if you don't like to be seen playing cards by daylight. I don't care, the Miss Skippers make a regular practice of it as soon as they've finished tea—they're not so old neither—but Jemima Skipper says they can't see to work by candle-light. What do you all say?" She looked at her guests.

"By all means," said the old gentleman, always ready to contribute to the general amusement, although both he and his wife would greatly have preferred listening to Lucy's songs.

"Oh, you like cards; that's all right. Lucy dear—now where

are they? Bless me"—she paused, rubbing her chin, her usual way of jogging memory—"oh, I know, Lucy, they're in the popery jar; I put 'em there myself to make them smell sweet. By-the-by," she went on, as the fragrance spread over the room-while Lucy was taking out the cards, "I wonder whether it's called popery because the smell's any way like incense? You've had a deal of learning now, Hester Wrenshaw, perhaps you can tell me?"

Hester Kirton alone sat in happy ignorance of her aunt's blunder. As has been said, she had learned no French in her brief schooling, but, with her usual quick observation, she noticed the change in the faces of the rest. Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw pressed their lips hard to keep the corners from smiling. Lucy tried not to laugh out, and was vexed that her mother should have made such a jumble in company, and Jacob flourished his handkerchief again, and buried his face in it.

His action fortunately diverted Mrs. Frank's attention.

"You've dropped something, Mr. Bonham;" but he assured her she was mistaken. "Ah, well, it was my fancy, then. I often pull something or other along with my handkerchief out of my gulf, as Lucy calls it."

Bonham was sensitive about being laughed at himself, and could not bear to laugh at others; and yet if Mrs. Frank recurred to the "popery" jar, he felt he must laugh outright, and she always enjoyed her mistakes to the full, blundering in every wrong direction possible before she found out the right one.

In his desperate nervousness to prevent such a contingency, he tried to start a fresh subject, and nothing would present itself but Lucy's London friend. He had meant to ask Mrs. Frank about him when they were alone together, but an irresistible impulse against his better reason now forced the question to his lips.

"Have you seen your London friend again?" He spoke half to Lucy, half to her mother, and then stood mute, overwhelmed by the effect of his words.

The tailor's bodkin did not work greater magic on Sir Piercie Shafton than this apparently innocent question on Hester and Lucy.

The former crimsoned painfully, and then became very pale, her firmly-set mouth and heaving bosom telling of inward emotion.

Lucy first started violently, and then looked very angry; but before either of them could speak, Mrs. Frank exclaimed, looking

from one to the other with open eyes,—“London friend!—who do you mean, Mr. Bonham? Why, Lucy, what’s the matter—who’s Mr. Bonham talking about?”

As her mother spoke, Lucy had gone close up to the doctor.

“Say you mean nothing, you must,” she said, with a flash in her eyes, and at the same time a quivering lip that made him feel guilty of some great offence towards her.

Lucy knew that had she been the doctor, she could have rectified such a blunder in an instant; but Jacob had none of her ready wit to help him out.

He smiled feebly, wishing himself up the chimney or under the table, or anywhere but where he was standing, with every one’s eyes fixed expectantly on his face.

“I—I was only joking with Miss Lucy, you know, Mrs. Wrenshaw; doctors are allowed that privilege.”

It was lamely said, and did not deceive sharp-eyed Mrs. Frank; and although her motherly feelings shielded Lucy from public questioning, she could not let them all think her so easily blinded.

“Oh, I dare say, doctor; very pretty indeed; but what’s Hester got to do with it, then—is it your joke too, Hester?”

It was a hard struggle—an instant before she had despised Bonham for his falsehood, and now what was she to do? But she did not deliberate long; almost without apparent hesitation she raised her head and looked steadily at her aunt.

“Yes, aunt, you are right. Lucy will tell you about it another time.”

“Well, I’m sure,” said Mrs. Frank. The simple-hearted woman was more hurt than she chose to show. Lucy had never kept anything from her before, and Lucy—poor Lucy—was miserable; she dared not even look at her mother, she felt sure she should burst out crying if she did; to think that she should have had a secret from her—all for Hester’s sake—a secret she had found such difficulty in keeping, and that Hester for all reward was cross to her, and Jacob Bonham had betrayed her.

She looked up at him, intending to be full of indignation; but he seemed so utterly wretched that she pitied him.

There was an awkward silence, no one knowing exactly how to break it. It was a real relief when Hester said,—“I don’t think we’ve got time to play cards, aunt, for father said he’d expect us by daylight, and it’s coming over dark fast now.”

She addressed herself to the elder Mrs. Wrenshaw, knowing how useless it would be to appeal to Mrs. Frank.

"I'm ready, dear. I have only to put on my bonnet and cloak."

"Hadn't you better stay here, Kitty?" said Mr. Wrenshaw to his sister-in-law, who was preparing to follow the others upstairs; "if the whole flock goes to put on bonnets and things, it will take an hour or so. I know what those 'last words' are; they swell into sentences—paragraphs—sometimes chapters even; they're as bad as yeast dumplings."

The drive to Kirton's Farm was a silent one. The only talkative member of the party, Mr. Wrenshaw, had a great dislike to driving in the dusk, especially a horse he was not used to; his wife was thinking over old times, which the sight of her two nieces had recalled vividly, and Hester was glad to be left to her own meditations.

She wondered whether her aunt or uncle would mention what Mr. Bonham had said, before her father. No, it was not likely, they were not chatter-boxes, like aunt Frank. Hester had a contempt for talkative people, her belief being that they never thought—she could not do both easily, therefore it seemed more natural to think others could not do so either.

They were soon at the farm-gate. Hester jumped down and opened it, cautioning her uncle against the large stones laying about.

"I'll mind, my dear: don't you be afraid," he answered. He disliked being in any way schooled by a woman, and he prided himself on his driving.

As they approached the house, the door opened and Mr. Kirton appeared; a small bit of tallow candle, fixed on a save-all, held up above his head; he had just sent Biz to the kitchen, half crying at the stern rebuke he had administered for her wanton extravagance. She had come to the door as soon as she heard the wheels with a pair of candles, mounted up in two tall brass candlesticks; "one gave such a mossel o' light," she said, and Mr. Wrenshaw might break his neck over the stones.

Ralph Kirton helped his sister-in-law to alight, and then shook hands with his visitors; it was a formal greeting with little of heart in it.

Hester passed on rapidly and threw open the parlour door; she then, spite of her father's warning looks, called to Biz to bring another candle, and asked her guests if they would not have some supper; fortunately they both refused, and Mrs. Wrenshaw said she was tired and should be glad to go to her room when she had wished good-night.

Poor Hester took up a candle with a heavy heart; she had done all she could for her aunt's comfort, but she bitterly felt the contrast the gaunt, bare, carpetless room upstairs made to the comfortable bed-chamber at Mrs. Frank's.

CHAPTER XVII.

DOCTOR AND NURSE.

"I TELL you what, Hester," said Mr. Wrenshaw to his wife, as he was shaving himself next morning in his bedroom at Kirton's Farm, "we should have come here first; we've changed our quarters for the worse; it's as bad as shaving with a blunt razor."

"Hush, Robert! I can't bear you to say it, because of that poor child. Did you see how ashamed she looked last night, when her father came to the door with that wretched bit of candle in his hand?"

"Don't talk about him," said Mr. Wrenshaw, making a very ugly grimace; "or I shall cut myself, perhaps. I've a great mind to ask for my bill when I go away; I wish to my heart we'd never come."

"Never mind," said his wife; "it will only be for two days, and it gives us an opportunity we could not otherwise have had of seeing something of poor Hester."

"Seeing something; you may well say that, my dear," said her husband: "she is pretty enough to look at; but she scarcely speaks a word, poor thing."

"She might have been shy yesterday; she will be more herself at home, very likely. I cannot help being very much drawn to her; there is something superior about her, spite of her imperfect education."

"Well," said her husband, as he sat carefully stropping his razor, "I'll not question your discernment, Hester—I don't say I don't like superior women, because of course I might get into trouble," and he looked slyly at his wife; "but give me Lucy in preference to her cousin, any day. She's my sort of girl, so heartily full of fun and spirits; and yet she's neither silly nor bold."

"She's a very sweet girl; but I suppose it is because I know you'll like her the best, that I'm trying to make you like poor

Hester too : one thing is certain—little as I have seen of her, if I were in any trouble or difficulty, I should much prefer Hester's counsel to Lucy's."

"And I shouldn't, with all due deference to you, my dear ; when I'm in trouble, I like a little soothing and comforting, to be cheered, in fact ; now, I take it, Lucy 'd be the very girl for that. Hester 'd give you good advice, no doubt, and expect you to go and follow it directly, perhaps reprove you if you didn't. The sort of way some mothers pick up children when they tumble—they set 'em on their legs with a shake and a 'how dare you?' and perhaps add a threat of a whipping if it happens again. Now, my mother was something like Lucy ; I think the child takes after her. She used always to kiss us and comfort us, and blame the chair or the stairs, or anything but us, for our downfalls."

Mrs. Wrenshaw laughed, but she told him he would certainly keep breakfast waiting if they talked any longer, and then she went downstairs.

Ralph Kirton tried to be agreeable, but as Mr. Wrenshaw afterwards remarked, he was not much better at it than a bear at dancing ; he had rather a strange notion of hospitality ; he writhed when he heard Hester pressing her aunt to eat more bread and butter, and talked generally more about the price and scarcity of provisions than any other subject. They were still at breakfast—Hester had contrived to persuade her father to have meals in the parlour during the visit—when Biz came in.

"Here, Muss Heaster, you be wanted. Peter Stasson's took as bad as bad, and Faith be at the back door a-cryin' an' a-sobbin' like a pump, a'most."

Mr. Kirton gave an angry grunt.

Hester looked up calmly.

"Tell Faith to wait, I'll come in a minute or so——"

And without seeming to hurry, she told her aunt a few particulars about Peter, and then begged her to excuse her for a while ; but she did not leave the table till her guests had finished ; a secret consciousness told her that in her absence their breakfast might not be so satisfactory as she wished.

At the back door stood Faith, a delicate-looking girl herself, in sad trouble.

She was scarcely intelligible, but Hester managed to gather that her father, after several days of restlessness, and total loss of sleep and appetite, had suddenly fainted that morning, when he had returned home to breakfast.

He was still lying, as Faith said, half dead. Hester bid her saddle Bob (who was to remain with the carriage to re-convey the Wrenshaws to Stedding), and go down at once, and fetch Mr. Bonham, and then she went through the farm with her quick, firm step, to Peter's little cottage. Poor Mrs. Stasson met her at the door, her sickly baby in her arms; the child was teething, suffering the unknown agonies so often disregarded as peevishness and "fractiousness." The mother seemed to have lost all power of quieting the writhing, wailing creature, but Hester took it from her at once, and soothed it, swaying it gently backwards and forwards, while she listened to the poor woman's fears about her husband.

She said she more than dreaded it was the fever, and, if it was, what would become of 'em all? for he so weak and that, he'd be down liker six weeks than one, "and how shall I feed these?" she said, looking round helplessly at four other little ones who stood huddled in a corner, with their fingers in their mouths staring at "Muss Kirton."

Peter's wife was a poor, helpless body, Hester knew, at the best of times. She had left Stedding early in life for London service; her mistress had taken a liking to her, and had her educated, and, unluckily for Peter, her pretty face had taken his fancy when she came down one Whitsuntide to see her friends. I scarcely know why I say unluckily; perhaps had she been a quick, clever manager, she would have had a sharp tongue and a temper to match, and have lacked the tenderness and gentleness that made her such a fond wife and mother.

She was literally overwhelmed by this calamity; it had crushed all helpfulness and woman's wit out of her.

Hester knew her too well to be surprised.

"I'd like to go up and see Peter, Jane. Here," she said, beckoning the eldest boy from the group; he was about eight, a roguish, intelligent looking child, who immediately poked out his chin, and dropped his head between his shoulders, as if something dreadful were going to happen.

"Come here," said Hester, decidedly.

The boy looked round at his sisters, as if taking mute counsel, but they only nestled their little rough heads closer together, grinning in that peculiar way for which their own word "sniggering," is perhaps the aptest description.

Peter, for he was the eldest, looked up again at Hester, and something in her eye impelled him slowly towards her,

grasping his corduroy trousers with each hand as if to steady himself.

"Now mind what I say, Peter : be a good boy—sit down on that stool ; no, not on the edge ; sit back and make a lap ; there now, mind baby carefully till I come down again."

Small Peter's face looked very doleful ; he didn't object to baby when she was good ; but he hated squalling with true masculine hatred ; he looked sullen as well as doleful, as the poor little thing set up a fresh cry at finding itself stationary. The poor mother was going to take baby again, but Hester stopped her.

"Be a good boy now and rock your knees like so ; and if you keep baby good I'll bring you a bit of sugar, maybe, presently."

This changed matters ; he knew "Muss Heaster" always kept her word, and by means of that extraordinary fascination children exercise over each other he somehow or other kept the poor little thing tolerably quiet.

Hester went up the creaking staircase in silence. Peter's room had a sloping ceiling, and although more in disorder than it might have been, it was clean ; but the atmosphere of fever was there already, that heated thickened air, which makes us almost see the demon Disease present, crowding up what empty space there may be, with his foul black wings.

Peter opened his eyes feebly and looked at her. His mind was evidently wandering, and what he said was so low and indistinct, that she could not catch its meaning.

Poor Jane hid her face in the patchwork curtain and cried quietly ; but she was so evidently losing all power of self-control, that Hester beckoned her out of the room into a smaller one at the back, where Faith and some of the children slept.

As Hester closed the door after them, Mrs. Stasson burst into hysterical sobs. Poor creature, she had struggled as much as her weak nature could ; but the strain had been too sudden for her to bear up longer.

Hester stood by patiently, and presently the sobs became less frequent and violent.

"Ah, Miss Kirton, you don't know what it is ; you don't know how hard it is to see your husband no better nor a child for help—him as is so good and so tender—him as takes all the cares and worrits off me, and when there's a trouble or a fret, seems to make all smooth and right—and now there he lies—he can't even

tell me what he'd like, or what's right to do. Oh! Peter, Peter!" and she burst into fresh sobs.

"Now, look here, Jane," said Hester, in a kind, motherly, but decided tone, as if she were years older than the other, "you mustn't fret and take on like this, because you're not going to be left alone. I shall come across every day, and see what's best to do. Yes—well," she said, as if to check the poor woman's thanks and blessings, which came forth as freely as her tears; "but there is a good deal for you to do, too, Jane—the great thing is to keep the house quiet. Isn't there a neighbour would take some of the young ones in the day? Stay," she said, "I'll go round to Alick's wife myself; she's a dirty, thriftless woman, but she is very kind-hearted—I'll see what can be done. Mr. Bonham will tell us what's to be done about Peter when he comes, and I'll tell my aunt too."

What a blessed feeling it is in trouble to have some one to lean on—some one who will take both reins and whip too, guiding as well as counselling.

Half Jane Stasson's trouble seemed lightened as she followed Hester downstairs.

The baby set up a cry, of course, as soon as she spied her mother; but Hester patted Peter on the head, and told him she would not forget the sugar, as he had kept baby quiet. She bade Mrs. Stasson send for her directly the doctor came, and then went round to speak to Alick's wife, who gladly promised to see after the children.

Hester had just finished telling Mr. Wrenshaw about poor Peter, when Faith came to say Mr. Bonham had arrived. She had met him not far from the farm, and he had come along with her.

Hester was glad of this interruption. Her aunt had protested against her plan of nursing Peter, on account of the infection, for she thought he probably had typhus fever; but Hester was resolved to have her own will in the matter—it was all she could do; she had nothing else to give the poor fellow, and she had not the slightest fear of infection; but she felt sorry to disagree with her aunt, and was relieved when Mr. Bonham said he thought it was a low fever of a typhoid nature, but not typhus, and certainly not infectious.

He seemed so alert and self-possessed as he gave his directions that Hester could scarcely believe him the same nervous hesitating person she had seen the night before. She had taken a dislike to

him and had dreaded seeing him, but she hoped he would be of use to Peter ; and she had not hesitated to send for him. Still it was very unpleasant and painful that he, an entire stranger, should be in possession of her secret, for he must be, or what could he have meant by Lucy's London friend ; but she forgot all this uncomfortableness, when she met him in Peter's bed-room. He was no longer Mr. Bonham, but the doctor, and his manner inspired her with confidence in his skill.

Jacob rode slowly away ; he had to make a considerable circuit before he reached home, and had also a commission to execute for Hester.

How wrongly he had judged her ; he had thought her cold, hard, and indifferent to the feelings of others, and here she was, willing to sacrifice health and comfort, to nurse a poor sick farm labourer. Jacob was tender-hearted and generous, and this charitable devotion quickly effaced the unfavourable impression former events had made upon him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LETTER DELIVERED.

LUCY WRENSHAW was sitting at her pianoforte, feeling very dull and good-for-nothing, when Rachel put her head into the room. She looked red and mysterious ; Lucy thought something must be the matter.

“ Oh ! if you please, miss, there's somethin' o' yours, I found it under the table this morning, when I was sweepin', and I put it in my pocket, and I never giv'd it another thought, till I went up just now to clean myself.”

She handed a crumpled and rather soiled letter to Lucy, looking slyly at her as she did so.

Lucy took it and turned it to see the address, and then she changed colour vividly, but she was not going to satisfy Rachel's curiosity. She put the letter down beside her, until the maid having no excuse for staying, took her leave—burning to know how a sealed note, addressed to her young mistress, in a man's writing, happened to be on the floor ; perhaps it was fortunate that the writer had an old-fashioned liking for sealing-wax.

Lucy's hands trembled as she held the letter, shew knew fast

enough whose the writing was ; but how came the note there ? She could not summon courage to open it, and then it suddenly occurred to her, that he had written to reprove her for having a secret from her mother, as if she had not been unhappy enough about that, as if she had not half cried her eyes out, when she implored her mother's pardon on the previous evening after they all went away. She opened the note in a puffet, but she had to read it twice over, before she could take in the sense of it, and then she burst into tears.

Could it, indeed, be true that Jacob loved her—that she might now love him with her whole heart, for the manly tone of the letter made him again the Jacob she had known at first, before he began to be nervous with her. She took it up and read it again—how full of love it was ! how different to that other deceitful fellow's letter !

She wished her mother were at home, for she would tell her at once, there should be no more secrets between them ; she knew she would be so pleased, and she was just thinking whether it would be worth while to go out and meet her, when in she came radiant with smiles and importance. She had just met the vicar, and he had stood and talked five whole minutes with her.

“And what an agreeable man he is, my dear,—so very genteel.”

“Yes, mamma, but now I—I—there, read that,—but to yourself, mind.”

And while her mother read, Lucy covered her face with her hands.

Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw, as soon as she had read the letter, behaved in a most indescribable manner between kissing and hugging her daughter, and laughing and crying, and wondering whether she could call Mr. Bonham “Jacob” the next time they met, and as to what Miss Jemima Skipper would have to say—when a new thought occurred to her.

“Did he leave the note himself ?”

“I don't know ; Rachel said she found it under the table.”

“My gracious ! how very odd ! did he throw it in at the window ? But I say, Lucy, you must write an answer at once, my dear. How could it have come ? I must inquire about this.”

“I can't, mamma,” said poor Lucy. “Oh, if he had only said it instead of writing !”

“Oh, that's nonsense,” and Mrs. Frank was proceeding to argue according to her usual plan, by bringing forward illustra-

tions of her different friends' conduct under the same circumstances, when there came a double knock at the door, and in a minute Rachel appeared. She was evidently trying not to laugh, but the effort was not successful.

Mr. Bonham wanted to see Mrs. Wrenshaw; he had a message from Miss Kirton; he would not detain Mrs. Wrenshaw long.

"Yes, oh yes; it's all right, show him in," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, in great excitement; and then, before Lucy could stop her, she slipped out through the other door, just as Rachel showed in Mr. Bonham.

Lucy felt strongly inclined to run after her, but Jacob was in the room before she had recovered from her surprise.

She rose and held out her hand as he came towards her, but she could not look at him; her face and throat were suffused with blushes, she longed to cover her eyes with her hands.

"I did not mean to intrude on *you*, Miss Wrenshaw," he said, hesitatingly. "I—I had only to give a message from Miss Kirton to your mamma." He just took her offered hand, and let it drop instantly.

Lucy could raise her eyes now. What did it all mean? He was looking at the carpet, not at her. Was she in a dream, or was that letter a cruel hoax, not written by him at all? She trembled so that she could scarcely stand; but Jacob could not see it, he was still looking at the carpet.

"What is the message?" she said, at last, in such a fluttering voice that he started; but still he did not look up.

"Why, I'm sorry to say, a man named Peter Stasson—you—you know him, I think," and a sudden flash of memory told him when and where he had seen the man before, and how plainly Lucy had shown her indifference on that luckless evening; "he's very ill; and as it is certainly fever, and your cousin is anxious to devote herself to nursing him, she thinks it will be better for you and Mrs. Wrenshaw not to go to Kirton's Farm. Your uncle and aunt will return early in the day."

"Is Hester going to nurse him? Have you agreed to it? Oh, Mr. Bonham, will it not be a risk?" She clasped her hands, and looked up in his face, forgetting everything but Hester's danger.

He was obliged to meet her eyes now; they were full of tears; she seemed to be imploring his counsel, and to be willing to yield to it.

He, too, felt in a dream; this was not the flippant, satirical

girl he had so shrunk from last night ; but she was waiting for his answer, and he must speak, although he would much rather have stood there, drinking in the soft sweetness of her eyes.

“No; I do not think there is any risk, I hope not—although, of course, nursing such an illness involves much fatigue and self-denial. I should think, from what I have seen of Miss Kirton this morning, that she would not shrink from either.”

A sudden spasm of jealousy crushed poor Lucy's heart so tightly in its iron fingers, that she could scarcely breathe. This, then, was the key of the mystery. Hester's strength of mind and nobleness—for poor Lucy thought the two expressions synonymous—had robbed her of Jacob's love, for he had loved her, and he had written that letter to tell her so ; but had she not always told herself she was too weak and unworthy to fix any man's love ? Yesterday evening had completed Hester's charm : he had dropped that note from his pocket, and now he would never know she had seen it ; he would think he had destroyed it, as he doubtless meant to do. She was not angry with him, only she knew she was broken-hearted. She remembered how, after she had planned their meeting, her secret dread lest Jacob should prefer Hester—and now it had come to pass ; but Hester must have been to blame. How greedy of her, with a lover of her own, to rob Lucy of all her happiness ! and they would meet constantly at Peter Stasson's ; yet she did not believe Hester loved Jacob—could she be a bad designing girl, after all ?—and here a sudden thought struck Lucy. Hester might try to conceal her share in the revelation of last night, by throwing it all on her cousin, and if Jacob recollected her angry manner, he would believe it too ; she was so utterly wretched, she could scarcely keep back her tears ; but one thing she had resolved on, she would rather die than let him know that he had dropped that letter.

“Ah, you have been to see Peter,” she said, almost unconsciously.

Jacob hardly heard her : he was thinking intently over all that had passed on the previous evening. What could have caused the change in Lucy's manner ? She had spoken to him almost fiercely, and now she was timid, almost sad ; and then he remembered his unlucky question—perhaps he had made mischief between her and her mother, and she was unhappy in consequence. The thought tore through all the fences which doubt, distrust, or wounded pride had reared round his love, and sprang to his lips almost without his will.

"Miss Wrenshaw, I am afraid—in fact, I am sure—I—I grieved you last night, by asking that foolish indiscreet question. I ought to have asked your forgiveness then; but, somehow, I believe, I thought you were too much offended to grant it—and—and—do you forgive me?"

"I was very silly to be angry," said poor Lucy, her tears coming now, spite of her struggle to keep them back; "but I had never had a secret from mamma before, and it so grieved me that she should hear it from any one but myself." She longed to say "it was not my secret," but that would be seeming to talk too much of herself to him now.

Her words and manner agitated him strangely: she spoke as simply as a child, but how could she talk on such a subject to him at all, for he imagined that she had met Hallam unknown to her mother. Still he could not shrink from her confidence, she spoke so gently and trustingly; but it was hard to be treated like a brother by Lucy—it was almost more than he could bear.

There was a pause; it gave Lucy time to think. Why should she shrink from this, the only opportunity she might have of righting herself with Jacob? She had lost his love; that she could not, would not seek to regain; but why, just for Hester's sake, should she lose his good opinion? for it struck her suddenly now, that her cousin's meeting with Mr. Hallam was not accidental, and Mr. Bonham might be thinking all this while the same thing of her; fortunately, no lurking hope betrayed itself that this might be the reason of his coldness, or I am afraid Lucy's pride would have scorned to take any steps to recall his love; she told herself she only did not want to lose his good opinion, so she went on, looking at him appealingly, "Mr. Bonham, will you do me a great favour?"

"I will do anything in the world for you," he said, passionately, for her eyes had driven him almost beside himself again.

"I want you not to mention about—about my London friend to any one, please; he is not my friend at all, but—" she was going on, but the words almost choked her. What right had he to such an explanation, after all? She stood blushing.

Jacob started; the mist began to clear a little, but his love gave no time for thought or judgment.

He took Lucy's hand.

"Miss Wrenshaw, did you mean what you said just now—not your friend?"

Lucy trembled more and more: that wonderful, indescribable

sensation she had first known fully under the oak-trees was again taking possession of her ; she did not think either, but she knew, that Jacob loved her ; his hand trembled till it seemed to vibrate through her whole being. She knew everything now ; the magic of that grasp revealed it—his love, his jealousy, all—she did not want to speak, or move, or in any way break the soft spell of happiness—that happiness, the consciousness that the love we covet is our own—there are no words to tell the bliss that first moment brings.

But the pressure of the hand that held hers roused her.

“ Yes, indeed, it is true,” she said ; and she looked up at him, to clear away any lingering doubt.

“ Then, Lucy,” said Jacob—“ I must call you Lucy—I did not mean to say this to you, because I thought you cared for some one else, but I have been nearly mad since that evening ; perhaps I am mad now,” he said, hoarsely, passing his hand over his forehead. “ Will you say to me, in your own dear voice, that you are quite heart free ? ”

Lucy smiled.

The smile was enough for Jacob, his arm was round her in an instant, and in hurried, breathless words, he was telling his love—his passionate love for her ; but poor Lucy could scarcely listen ; the change from grief to joy had been too sudden, and she hid her face and sobbed on his bosom.

He let her cry quietly there a little while, and then he lifted up her face.

“ Lucy, are you really my own Lucy, or is this all a dream ? ”

She smiled up at him. “ Shall you never be sorry ? ”

“ Sorry, you little darling ? It is you, Lucy, who ought to think of that ; but I cannot let you think of it ; it may be selfish, but I am not going to let you think twice about it, you might change your mind ;” he pressed her yet more closely to him.

“ Poor darling, how its little heart flutters ! Did I frighten you by my suddenness ? I ought to have been more careful : were you very much surprised, Lucy ? ”

She laughed and gently tried to disengage herself. She felt more courageous again now, and almost disposed to be saucy.

“ No, I was not really surprised, I was puzzled by your manner ; after what I had just read, I thought,” she said, mischievously, “ *you* had changed your mind.”

He looked surprised, but he started in utter amazement when she held up the letter to him.

"Why, that's a letter I wrote some days ago ; how ever did you get it, Lucy ?" and he tried to take it from her.

But she held it fast, vowing she would not say how she got it, and she would never part with it. She even intimated that the letter was much nicer than he was, till he declared she had picked his pocket, and ought to be punished for such a transgression.

"You are mine now, dearest," he whispered, as he bent down to kiss her ; "you will be mine altogether before long, won't you, my own darling Lucy ?"

CHAPTER XIX.

UNDER THE OAK.

WEEKS had passed by. Peter Stasson was pronounced convalescent, but it seemed as if he would never regain even the amount of health he had before his illness ; a constant wearing back-ache rendered stooping almost an impossibility. But for Hester, Ralph Kirton would have filled up his place long ago ; she was his firm friend, and would not hear of his dismissal.

She had grown paler during his illness, but it had been a blessing to her in many ways.

It had diverted her mind from the constant thought of Hallam, and had thus prevented the fits of abstraction which had so irritated her father. She was happy again now ; she felt grateful that to please her he had so broken through all his prejudices as to invite her uncle and aunt, and far more that he had permitted her to nurse Peter.

The father and daughter had never been so happy together before. Ralph Kirton noticed her softened manner and approved it, although with his usual misanthropy he guessed she was only trying to get the soft side of him on account of Peter. He did her an injustice ; but then Ralph Kirton only studied human nature with an eye to his own advantage—all better feelings and motives and inner springs remaining unrevealed. He ought to have judged Hester better. If she wanted to ask a favour, she would have been far more likely to do it in a proud blunt way,

without any attempt to prepossess, simply because she so hated any double or false dealing.

That meeting with Hallam had been a sore trial ; but for his express prohibition, she must have told her father ; she had quite determined that if she saw Hallam again—and she longed for this greatly—she would say, at the risk of displeasing him, that she could not keep it secret from her father.

She had come to this determination as she sat by Peter Stasson's bedside, and listened to his delirious wanderings. She thought it would be dreadful to be seized with illness with a secret-burdened mind ; she saw that the inner care or anxiety was sure then to be revealed. Poor Peter, who had never grumbled to his wife when in health, raved constantly of her careless, thoughtless ways as he lay helpless and unconscious on his bed.

Hester felt thankful that the poor woman had not been left alone to nurse him. Her weak spirit might have broken at what she would have considered her husband's unkindness, and now she was fast learning, under Hester's decided, clear instructions, how to manage better for herself. It may be kind to do things for people ; it is surely far kinder to make them, either by example or teaching, self-helpful.

Hester was born to command, and she was exercising this hitherto dormant talent for the first time. Perhaps nothing frets and worries the temper so much as allowing a talent either to rust or remain undeveloped : the very exercise of it brings happiness, because it brings full employment either to head or hands, and there can be no want of cheerfulness where there is plenty to do, unless in exceptional cases.

Lucy had written her cousin a rapturous description of her happiness ; she had lost all remembrance of her unkindness, but she had not been over to Kirton's Farm. Her mother, spite of the doctor's assurances, had so greatly dreaded infection, that she had forbidden Lucy's visits, and had gladly accepted for her an invitation from Mrs. Wrenshaw to spend a fortnight with them on their return to London. Hester sighed when she heard of it ; it was well for the harmony between her and her father that she did not know how urgently her aunt, and afterwards her uncle, had begged that she might accompany Lucy in her visit. Kirton had refused, and at last so harshly, that old Mr. Wrenshaw had said to him, just as they were leaving to return to Stedding, " I tell you what, Kirton, to be plain with you, you're foolish, after all ; you're older than either my wife or I, and in the case of your girl

being left alone in the world, we are her natural protectors; therefore, I must say, I think the more she sees of us the better."

Ralph Kirton pressed his thin lips together.

"I have never asked you to be Hester's guardian that I'm aware of; it will be time enough for her to be seeking a home when I'm taken away from her; and it isn't always the oldest that goes first," he added, with a sneer.

They were all three standing in the parlour while this talk was going on. Hester was out in front, helping a boy to put the pony to, and then stowing her aunt's bag and wraps into the little back seat of the carriage. So she was safe out of hearing. Mrs. Wrenshaw pressed her husband's arm, for she saw his colour rising; but he was not a man to nourish a grudge. He held the old maxim: it is better to reprove than to be angry secretly—a maxim sadly perverted by universal faultfinders; but which Mr. Wrenshaw seldom took advantage of. He and his wife had talked much to Biz about Hester and her cheerless, solitary life; and, as she was their godchild, he felt that he was justified in making an unusual effort for her advantage.

"I don't want to seem meddling in any way, Kirton; but she's Janet's child, and I can't think so very quiet a life, without any change in it, good for a young girl. I'd give her a few more advantages, if I were you; I would, indeed. It's but natural you shouldn't, at your time of life, care about change; but you see the case is different with young folks; the surest way to keep them cheerful and steady is to let them see a little of each other." His wife pulled his coat sleeve warningly, for she had been watching Ralph's face; but the independent old man went on. "I say again, I don't want to seem meddling or interfering; but I wish you'd think it over, and let us have Hester every now and then; a week or two at a time."

"I gave you your answer just now," said Kirton, doggedly. He controlled the resentment he felt at his brother-in-law's interference, for he thought the Wrenshaws must have taken a liking to Hester, or they would not wish to have her with them. "She's happy enough where she is; if she went abroad she might get wants and wishes for things I can't afford to give her. Thank you all the same," he said, looking at Mrs. Wrenshaw instead of her husband; "but I think she's best to keep her own home and station, for the present."

His strong power over himself had enabled him to make the

end of his speech much more civil, both in words and tone, than the beginning. But in the evening he wrote to Mr. Goldsmith, asking him to meet him at a station on the London side of Stedding, to make some alteration in his will. By this means he avoided the expense of entertaining his friend at Kirton Farm, and also, what was of still greater moment, the chance of Goldsmith's being recognized in Stedding, or of questions being asked at the farm; for to be known to employ a London lawyer would, of course, suggest the probability of the rumour—which it was his daily effort to live down—that he was rich.

Hester was disappointed that she had seen so little of her aunt; but Peter was in such a dangerous state during the first week of her attendance on him, that she had no leisure to brood over this thought; perhaps it filled her mind more now that he no longer required her services.

"Well, Muss Heaster," said Biz, one afternoon, "A do say, that a do, that Peter ought to do a deal to show how thankful he be for yer care and yer nussing; but ere-a-mussy not he, I warrant ye—and as for Jane, she grateful! you might as well expect the conger in the parlour there to show gratitooode for being cleaned and stuffed, and made to look nice. He'd like to be at his nasty ways again in the river mud, he 'ood, just as she'd like to go back to all she's shiftlessness."

"Well, I hope you are mistaken, Biz; she seems thankful enough, at all events."

"Thankful. I don't misdoubt, muss, but what she'll allus be thankful and to spare in she's words—words is cheap eno'—not but what I don't think people should be civil, but its goin's on and doin's I cares for more nor words and courtseyings. Ere-a-mussy, there be some folk, and Jane Stasson be one on 'em, as wears all their feelings outside 'em, and don't keep none for their innards. Ye can't say a word out, but ye blister she somewhere; she be hurt in a minute, but as to recollectin' what yer been a-teachin' on she, Muss Heaster, not she."

Hester smiled, for although Biz had probably more depth, or, as she said, more "innards" of feeling, she was one of the touchiest of that sensitive class, domestic servants—and how sensitive they are—but so well is the feeling hidden under the outward mask of calm civility they compel themselves to wear, that it often baffles even a keen observer.

Spite of his rigid methodical habits, Ralph Kirton had a way of keeping tea waiting, which irritated Biz extremely. Her moral

cowardice and natural fear of her master prevented her from showing this openly, but she always managed to make him in some way suffer for what she called, behind his back, such "unreg'lar goin's on." There was a heavy wooden stool in the washhouse, on which she mounted when she wanted to place some of her saucepans on a high shelf, and she used, when he had transgressed, to drag this stool gratingly over the inner brick floor in such an unnecessary manner, that Kirton was sometimes obliged to call out that he "couldn't and wouldn't stand it."

He generally preferred enduring it, as he perfectly understood its motive, and the suppressed grumbling that was sure to follow an outbreak from him was almost as unpleasant.

Even Hester began to wonder this evening at her father's delay; at last she went out into the yard to look for him, expecting to see him come over Picket Acre field; but he was not to be seen, and yet she knew he went in that direction.

Perhaps he had taken a round, and might be returning by the road after all.

She walked to the front of the house. It was growing so dusk that at first she could not distinguish anything near the entrance gate; but she heard the sound of voices, and as she leaned against the palings in front of the house, shading her eyes with her hand, she saw that two figures were standing in the deeper gloom of the great oak-tree, apparently talking earnestly. A moment more, and she discerned that one was her father, but who the other man was she could not distinguish. Her father held the gate half open with one hand, and stood in the passage thus made, as if to prevent the other person from entering.

Who was the other?

Hester felt curious, and was just advancing towards them, when the figure in the shadow moved slightly away from Kirton, and stood out clear and distinct in the fast waning light. Who was it? Hester's throbbing heart told her too surely, and she instinctively retreated and crept quickly out of sight, agitated as she had never felt before, for that her father was very angry she was sure from his vehement gesticulations.

Angry! Ralph Kirton had suspected and doubted through his whole life all those belonging to him; and although he had naturally, by this treatment, created deceit and cunning among those he employed, still his hardest suspicions had never been fully justified; in him suspicion was a natural growth, not the graft of circumstance. And now to find that what he had almost

laughed at himself for believing was a bitter truth ; that all his care to seclude his child from the society of her kind had been thrown away ; that he had been blind when his sight should have been keenest, roused every angry and indignant feeling to vehement action.

He had taken the round by the high road, as Hester had surmised, and just as he reached his own gate, Mr. Frederic Hallam appeared a short distance off.

Kirton had written to Mr. Goldsmith about Hallam, and the lawyer had much tranquillized his mind, by assuring him of the young man's aptitude for business, and his conviction that he had thought of business only while at Kirton's Farm, so that for the moment the farmer thought his friend had sent him down with some message, or private instructions (although, as he had himself so lately seen Goldsmith, this seemed improbable), and as soon as Hallam came up with him he asked if this were the case.

"Not in any way ; this is a visit of pleasure," replied Hallam, with perfect coolness. "I found myself in your neighbourhood, Mr. Kirton, and wished to renew my acquaintance with you."

Ralph Kirton looked hard at him.

"You've, perhaps, forgotten what I told you sir. I don't love strangers, nor do I consort with 'em."

"Ah, but you can't consider me a stranger now, my dear sir," said Hallam, with a good-humoured smile, that would have made his bright frank face irresistible to most men. "You will admit me as an old acquaintance, I feel sure, and give me a cup of tea. Allow me," and he laid his hand on the gate as if to open it.

"Not so fast, young man ; you don't know much of life, or you'd have learned before this never to be sure of anything." As he spoke he opened the gate and stood facing Hallam, so that he could not pass, grim and stern enough to withstand any intrusion.

But Frederic Hallam was resolute ; he had paid two fruitless visits to the farm lately, and after prowling about for some time, had walked boldly up to the house, and learned from Biz that no one was at home, as Hester was at the other side of the farm with her father, and would not be back till late.

Resolute—he was almost desperate. His debts were innumerable, and this old man, by a stroke of his pen, could make him free from the haunting fear of arrest, that was daily approaching certainty.

It would not be the first time he had carried the day by consummate assurance.

"Mr. Kirton," he said, boldly, "I will be frank with you. I did not come here only to see you; I—the fact is, I am deeply attached to your daughter."

He looked so honest still, it was wonderful Ralph Kirton could doubt him.

"My daughter!" gasped the old man—the unexpected declaration almost deprived him of words. "Hester!"

"Yes, and I think when I ——"

"And you have the assurance to stand there," Kirton went on vehemently, "and say to me that you are deeply attached to a girl to whom you never spoke above a word or two—whom you saw for about half an hour. Now hark ye here, Mr. Jack-a-napes," passion and fear together had mastered his self-control, "I know your game; you've heard some of these confounded lies people talk, that I've got money and that my girl'll have it too; she won't—she won't, not a farthing. I tell ye, she's a beggar; isn't she dressed like a beggar? don't she live like one? and you dare to pretend to me, you—you smooth-spoken rascal—you who call yourself a gentleman—that you want to take a girl like that for your wife, and make a lady of her, because—because you're in love with her?"

"Now, gently, my good friend," interposed Hallam, in his blandest manner; he laid his hand on the farmer's arm, who threw it off indignantly. "Don't excite yourself; look at the thing calmly now. Half an hour! why, Miss Kirton's pretty enough to make a man fall in love with her in five minutes: you wrong me, indeed you do!"

But Kirton would not listen.

"No, no; you double-faced humbug! I'm not doting yet, and even if I were what you fancy, and had money to leave my girl, not a farthing of it should she touch unless she married with my consent. Be off with ye—you don't come again under my roof—you know my mind now; and look ye, if ever I catch you skulking here again, I'll not leave a whole bone in your skin."

He raised his stick as he spoke.

Hallam was not a coward, but he saw it would do his cause more harm than good to persist just then; his wonderful power of self-restraint did not fail him now—it never did where his own interest was concerned—but his blood tingled at Kirton's coarse, insulting words.

"You are excited, Mr. Kirton, and say things you don't mean; some day you will find out how greatly you have wronged

me, and will be sorry for your present ungenerous conduct. I'll say good-day to you."

He turned slowly away, and sauntered down the lane, while the farmer sank against the gate-post, almost suffocated by the violence of the conflicting passions within.

CHAPTER XX.

KIRTON'S RESOLVE.

RALPH KIRTON stood leaning against the gate. Not to think over what he had heard—fixed thought was impossible just then—the passion he had partly let loose was not half exhausted; he felt it throbbing through all his frame, and dilating his heart till it seemed to be choking him. Body and mind were mingled in a wild chaos of resentment. About what?

He scarcely knew yet; he only felt that he had been betrayed. He suspected everybody, and he did not know how far the mischief might have spread.

He told himself this as the inward tumult became less violent; it still continued to rage, but the outward trembling was not so apparent.

At length—he hardly knew how long he had been there—he rose from his leaning posture, and walked slowly towards the house.

Did Hester know of this fellow's visit? was she expecting him? had there been meetings—clandestine correspondence?—ah! and he suddenly remembered the evening he had watched her stealthily from the doorway, as she sat reading a letter; and when he had come in quickly and quietly, to surprise her, she had crumpled it into her pocket with some careless excuse. This rascal had been writing to her, filling her young head with flattery and trash; now he understood her passionate fits and moody silence. And Goldsmith, did he know or was he duped too? No,—the miser argued to himself,—Goldsmith could not know of it; most of his money was already in his hands, and in the event of his own death, the rest would come to his care, until Hester was of age. It must be to his interest to keep her unmarried as long as possible. Yes, yes, that was a good stroke of policy. Lucy, was she in the secret of these visits?

He started to find himself at the kitchen door, still in such a tangle of doubt; he had gone round the house mechanically.

He stood still with a sudden effort, as one reins in a horse on the brow of a hill. What should he do? Speak to Hester; the idea scarcely crossed his mind; straight, open dealing was not Ralph Kirton's habit.

He must watch her closely; question Biz as to what she might have heard or observed. There was Peter Stasson too; Hester's interest in him had been lately greater than ever; perhaps he was in this Hallam's pay—who could tell what system of deceit had been practised by them all against him? He shook again with mingled terror and rage as he thought this.

And yet Hester's truthful face, and her rough bluntness from childhood upwards, seemed to force themselves on his memory, and to tell him he was wronging her; that in her, at least, was no deceit. But this excuse for her was only weak folly. Parents always made excuses for their children, he knew that. Still it was not likely that young spendthrift—he felt sure he was one—he looked like it—would have dared to come after Hester if he had not had some encouragement. Every moment strengthened his doubts, and heaped fresh fuel on the fire of his suspicions.

His hand was on the door, and still he had not decided what to do, and he must before he went in to Hester.

He walked back again to the angle of the house, and stood there, determined not to move till his mind was made up. What had come over him? This decision, so utterly unknown to him, irritated him almost as much as his suspicions. He had to stand there some minutes before he could force his mind to obey his will, before he could steady his purpose from the swaying movement that seemed to pervade his whole frame.

After a while he slowly turned towards the door again; he had determined not to speak to Hester till he had altered his will; he would affix a codicil, disinheriting her entirely, if she married without his consent, or in the event of his death, without Goldsmith's; and if she married Mr. Hallam, cutting her off with 50*l.* a year, to prevent the utter misery such a marriage must entail upon her. He had long ago settled what to do with his money in the event of Hester's death before his own; it would be parcelled out between a hundred different charities and public institutions, so as to be of no special benefit to any. Perhaps he thought thus to save his memory even the reproach of being considered rich. But he would watch the girl closely; ah! and Biz

too ; and if that old fool had been artful enough to deceive him, she should suffer for it ; she should turn out at once. Hester had grown woman enough for them to manage very well without her, if they took Faith Stasson, who'd want no wage at all, but be glad to come for the sake of her victuals.

He opened the door and went into the kitchen, well inclined to pick a quarrel with Biz, but both the women exclaimed so loudly at his appearance, that he was silenced for the moment.

"Father, father !" cried Hester, "what ails you ? you're as white as death."

"White ! do 'ee call he ?" chimed in Biz ; "it's white sure enough, but it's full of green and yaller streaks, and look at his throat, it's a'most purple. Ere-a-mussy, master, sit 'ee down and loose yer handkercher, and I'll run and get ye a burnt feather."

Hester had untied his cravat while the old woman spoke ; but, spite of his ghastly complexion, the veins that stood out on his forehead and throat like knotted cords, and the cold faintness he felt, Kirton would not own that he was ill. They were not to bother over him ; he had had a long trudge by the high road, he said ; flat-walking always tired him more than the fields. He should be all right again when he'd had a cup of tea.

Hester looked at Biz, but the old woman said nothing ; if the master liked to be ill, why he must take his own way ; she wur not a-goin' to thrust her head into a tiger's mouth, to make sure his teeth were sound, not she.

"Tea's all set now, Muss Heaster, and has been this hour." And then she made her escape into the washhouse as if she dreaded a storm.

But Hester felt alarmed.

"Father, it's no use saying you're not ill, I'm sure you are ; let me send for Mr. Bonham."

"Stuff, child ! I tell you I'm a bit tired, that's all. Send for the doctor, indeed ! and who's to pay him when he comes ?" He tried to smile—it was a ghastly grimace.

"Father, if you saw your face you'd say best pay a little money than run the risk of a fit, and that's what may be over you." She spoke in her hard, stern way ; it seemed to her wicked to throw away life for the sake of saving money, but she also felt just then, spite of her cold manner, how much she really loved her father.

He made her no answer, but looked at her steadily.

"Give me some tea," he said at last. He drank it down

thirstily, but she noticed how the cup shook in his hand. He seemed annoyed by her scrutiny.

"You fill cups so full," he grumbled. "Such waste, they're sure to spill when they're overfilled; there, that'll do, child: why don't ye drink yer own tea instead of garping at me like a frightened frog?"

She tried to swallow, but the tea seemed to choke her.

"Father, I can't; I'm anxious about you," she said, more tenderly than she had perhaps ever spoken. "Isn't there something you could take better than tea?"

"All I want, child, 's rest and quietness," he said, gruffly. The imploring expression of her eyes had disarmed his anger. "I'll be all right to-morrow, when I've had a sleep."

No more was said till the meal was over. Then Kirton looked at his watch, and said they were so late, they'd not want supper. Hester could tell Biz they'd best all get to bed betimes.

He went into his den as soon as he felt the physical power to do so, and fetched out a huge account-book—his usual substitute for the solace of a pipe, an extravagance he never indulged in. Hester sat on the opposite side of the fire on a low stool, her lap full of stockings, for, besides her own and her father's, she had, since Peter's illness, undertaken to help Mrs. Stasson in her weekly mending; it was no easy matter to darn the enormous holes, sometimes involving the loss of the entire heel, by the light of a single tallow candle, especially as to-night her father's sight seeming dimmer than usual, he pulled the candle so near him.

As she looked up every now and then, as if to take in a fresh supply of light, she continually met his eyes, not fixed openly on her, but in sly covert glances; he seemed trying to make out her thoughts, or suspicious of what she might be doing.

Just as she lit her candle, and was going up to bed, with the usual nodded good-night to her father, he said abruptly, with the same stolen glance at her,—“How long, maybe, is it since that young spark came down here on Goldsmith's business?”

“Near upon two months or more,” she said, after a moment's pause; then she coloured deeply, she could not help it.

“Do you call to mind what his name was?” he said, looking at her more decidedly now.

“Yes: Mr. Hallam, father.” She knew they had met, and she felt desperate. “Why are you asking me these questions, father? you have some reason for it.”

Directly the words were spoken she would have recalled them if she could—they seemed to have escaped without her knowledge.

To her great surprise, her father did not heed them; he dropped his eyes and said, carelessly,—“There, go to bed, child; I’m tired to-night, I tell ’ee. Good-night.”

The relief to Hester was so unexpected that she stood still, wonder-struck. Then she bent down over him, and kissed his forehead—a rare caress for her.

“I hope you’ll be better to-morrow, father,” she said, and left the kitchen.

CHAPTER XXI.

A SUMMONS.

HESTER passed a sleepless night.

What could be the meaning of her father’s manner? She must have been wrong in imagining that he was angry with Mr. Hallam; if so, he would not have spoken of him so quietly. Had Mr. Hallam been making friends with her father, been asking leave to come and see her, as Jacob Bonham did Lucy? had he consented?—she could not believe in such happiness. But would it be happiness? would not it be constant heart-burning and mortification to see him, with his refined notions, annoyed by all the meannesses which had so-fretted her during her aunt’s visit? She was sure Mr. Hallam was used to much finer ways than her uncle’s and aunt’s even. No, it would never do for him to visit at Kirton’s Farm; and yet how she longed to see him once more, to be quite sure he had not forgotten her; he had asked her to be his friend; she would never forget him, at any rate. But then her father’s gestures and subsequent agitation showed that he had been angry. What would come of it? She fell into a short, disturbed sleep every now and then, but always to start awake again, with the feeling that something dreadful was going to happen to her, for that an explanation with her father of some kind was impending she felt sure.

Morning came at last, rosy-streaked and cheering. Early riser as she was, she had somehow overslept herself this morning. She had not heard her father’s awakening tap at her door, and her room was so full of sunshine when she opened her eyes that she sprang out of bed in alarm—it must be past six o’clock.

She looked out of the window to see if her father was about ; there was no one crossing the farmyard ; all lay still in the sweet, unbroken calm and clear light of early morning. As Hester looked at it, it seemed impossible that care or worry could thrust themselves into such a scene of peace. During the night, a large web had been spun across her lattice ; she could not open it without destroying the frail, beautiful manufacture, and although she was not troubled with her cousin Lucy's vivid imagination or admiration for such things, she felt unwilling to break it : it looked like silver lace as the sunlight glittered on the dew-drops frosted over its surface.

Voices below the window roused her to full consciousness, and broke the peaceful spell that had held her there. She dressed herself hastily, and, as she did so, came the remembrance that something disagreeable was before her. Would her father speak that morning about Mr. Hallam, or would he let it go on ? She thought the latter ; she knew he disliked to speak openly, and although she wished it over, she too closely resembled him not to feel glad that she had time to consider : something or other might happen to prevent any explanation at all ; she should rejoice if it were so, and then came the remembrance of his pale face ; she wondered how he felt this morning.

She found Biz in the kitchen in a very cross mood, but then Biz shared the habit so common to her sex of being always cross before breakfast.

"I'm late," said Hester. "Has father been in from his rounds yet ?" She felt anxious, if he were angry with her, that he should have no further cause of displeasure by being kept waiting for breakfast.

"I dwon't knaow," said Biz. "It's hard enough to have everything to see to an' all, without being expected to know everything as well."

Hester usually set the breakfast things, which this morning were already placed. She did not attempt to conciliate the old woman, it was not her way ; she stood still thinking a moment.

Biz looked at her angrily.

"Well, Muss Heaster, I should think the muster had best know as you's down and ready, or, maybe, he'll be a-writing his fingers off, a-waiting and a-waiting in that there den, a nasty old hole as it be."

"In where ?" said Hester. The idea of her father being in

doors at that time in the morning was startling enough to rouse her from even the dreamy mood that possessed her.

"Why, in his fusty old writin'-place; where else would he be likely to be in-doors, Muss Heaster?" the old woman sneered, as openly as she dared. "Why, when I got down this morning there wurn't a bolt nor a bar undone, 'cept the parlour-door, and I looked in there, and the little closet door's shut fast."

"It always is shut. Perhaps father went out through the hall, or by the front door, he'd never be in writing the first of the morning, Biz; how can you say such a thing?"

"Well, then, please yourself, muss; go and try the other doors. Not but what I don't see as how he mayn't be a-writin', or countin'. I make no doubt he'd had unked news last night, by the look o' he. Not a soul's touched thay bolts."

"Perhaps he's ill," said Hester, her senses fairly roused. It seemed strange to her that this was the first time she had thought of his illness as likely to keep him in-doors.

She ran up to his bedroom; the bed was untouched, had not been slept in, but then Kirton was a man of peculiar habits, and if he rose by any chance a few minutes earlier than usual, he would give the spare time thus gained to making his own bed, so that Biz might have leisure for something more profitable in the dairy or elsewhere. Hester gave a rapid glance round the room—there was nothing to show it had been occupied during the night. Without feeling really frightened, a strange chill and nervous trembling crept over her; she felt her teeth chattering as she went downstairs again, but by a strong effort she checked this, and went into the kitchen.

"Ere-a-mussy, Muss Heaster, 'ee looks as white as white——"

But Hester did not listen. She quickly went into the hall, and thence to the front door to assure herself that the fastenings had not been removed, and then she stood still a few moments, her clear, practical mind now fully roused to the fact that something unusual had occurred.

The first idea that presented itself seemed the most natural, and she at once acted on its suggestions.

Her father had said more than once last night that he was over-tired; he had gone into his study, and had fallen asleep there. Without stopping to argue with herself the possibility of this, or of his having slept so long, she went through the parlour to the little door, and tried the handle.

It was, as she expected, locked on the inside.

She knocked boldly and firmly at first, for he might be sleeping soundly.

There was no answer. She went on knocking, but her hand became tremulous in spite of herself.

"Father, father," she called, putting her lips close to the door crack, "don't you hear me? it's I, Hester."

There was no answer, and she threw herself with all her strength against the door, and shook it by the handle.

Still there was no movement or answer; the dead weight of silence was fast numbing her faculties.

"Ere-a-mussy, what's the matter? isn't the muster inside?" said Biz, who, becoming inquisitive, had followed her.

The voice roused Hester, and again she called in an agonized voice, and again tried to force open the door, but in vain.

What had happened?

She stood still to think what was to be done. This was the only entrance; there had once been a sliding panel from the kitchen, but her father had had that securely nailed up and white-washed over; it would be hard to find now; the only window was a narrow slit high from the ground, not wide enough for even a child to get through, and grated besides.

There was but one way; she must transgress all her father's rules, and fetch a man to break open the door; he had always enjoined the strictest silence with regard to this den, and as none of the farm servants ever went into the parlour, they were ignorant of its existence, for as the study was built in the thickness of the wall, the door in the parlour might have been supposed only to communicate with the kitchen, doubtless its original intention.

Hester was soon across the farm yard; but agitated as she was, she was still collected, and outwardly calm. The first two men she saw were passed by, as unfit for her purpose. But coming out of the rick-yard she met Alick, the tall broad-shouldered Irishman.

She bade him follow her at once, without giving any reason for her words.

Alick pulled his hair and stared. He was not aware of having committed any particular misdemeanor lately, but going into the farmhouse was inseparable in his mind from words and wages; "words" being the term he applied to the severe lectures his master was accustomed to bestow on him, and this was not Saturday he knew well enough.

He followed Hester's quick footsteps lumberingly, scratching his head as he went, and when he found himself in the parlour, looking round, with an awe of the darkness (for the shutters were still unopened) that made him uncertain where to step.

Hester turned round now. "Stay, you cannot see," and she took down one of the parlour shutters. "You see that door, Alick. I want you to burst it open the best way you can, and then go into the kitchen, and wait for me. Do you want anything to break it open with?"

"By the powers, no, miss; now by your lave, if ye'll stand a one side," and almost without a pause, he ran back a few steps, and then dashing forward, sent the weight of his powerful shoulder against the door.

It groaned and creaked, but it did not yield.

The Irishman rubbed his shoulder and uttered an exclamation of surprise, and then he rushed at it again with greater vehemence. This time with effect; there was a louder crash, and the lock of the door gave way.

Hester's hand was on Alick's arm in a moment.

"Go into the kitchen, Alick; I will come to you."

Biz, who had been taking down the other shutters, now stood trembling for the result of this invasion of the master's den.

Hester shut the parlour door, and looked into the study. Her father's desk was fixed on the left, and she saw him sitting before it on his high-backed chair, quiet and unmoved by all the noise.

She went up to him.

His pen was in his hand—had he fallen asleep writing?

One narrow streak of light from the high window fell on his side-face and down his arm, like a golden riband.

Was it the light, or was his face a most unnatural colour? She leant nearer, but gently; she feared to wake him suddenly. His face was ghastly.

"Father!"

She touched his hand—it was chill as ice.

Suddenly her own words flashed back upon her; it was the fit she had so dreaded.

In an instant she had darted to the kitchen, and bid Alick fetch Mr. Bonham as quickly as possible, and then come back.

She hurried again to the study, pushing by Biz, who stood helpless and awestruck at the door.

But as she tried to take off the loosely tied neck-cloth, for he had not fastened it up again since last night, her hand touched his

chin ; the marble coldness appalled her. Was it—could it be—Death that chained her father there ?

The light was still partial, but she threw herself back on the desk to see his full face plainer—and then she sank on the floor—not fainting, but with a groan that brought Biz, at length roused from her mute terror, to her assistance.

Book the Second.

HESTER HALLAM.



CHAPTER I.

MARRIED.

"HELENA, do you remember Hallam, your devoted admirer last season?"

"I am not aware that I encourage 'devoted admirers,'" said Lady Helena Fortescue, with the deliberate manner some women have when they tell a falsehood, and are determined not to be contradicted, "but I remember your friend, Mr. Hallam, perfectly."

Captain Fortescue looked hard at his sister-in-law, but he looked with a certain admiration also, for her coolness surpassed belief; she met his eyes unflinchingly—her virtue was unimpeachable—and if she liked admiration she was not obliged to confess it to her brother-in-law.

"Well, we won't argue the point," and he laughed; "he went abroad suddenly last winter—I never inquired much about it—his man of business was very mum on the subject. I heard he was well, so I thought it best not to be inquisitive, thinking he would turn up again in a month or so, or I should hear from him."

"And have you not done so?"

Lady Helena thought her brother-in-law was getting prosy. Spite of the contemptuous way in which she had spoken of Hallam, she had liked his attentions, and was interested about him.

"Not a syllable, though I had suspicions of what has happened; but yesterday I met Mrs. Hallam, his mother, and I asked her where Fred was, and what he had been about—had he married? The question seemed thoroughly to upset her;

however, after a bit she recovered herself, and told me she was just going home: would I come with her? She lives in Wilton Place, you know; I've been there once or twice before."

His sister-in-law looked oppressed with the length of his story, and took little pains to conceal her impatience; however, he went on.

"She told me all about it; that sly Fred has married a fortune."

"Indeed!" She shrugged her beautiful shoulders. "I hope there is not an old woman tacked to it."

"A very pretty young one; don't look incredulous, Helena, there is a *but*, although not about age. His mother's distress is that she knows the bride is perfectly uncouth and unformed; in fact, she has made her out in her own mind a sort of country bumpkin; but she has not seen her, and no doubt exaggerates the evil, for we know how *exigeante* the mothers of only sons are apt to be. However, one thing is certain, the girl is not well-born."

"But where did he meet with her? while he was on the Continent?"

A little interest showed through her indifference now.

"No, it seems he heard of her last summer; went down with an introduction to the father, who by-the-by was an old miser, and when he died suddenly soon after—and here comes the old story—Hallam displayed a wonderful amount of interest in the poor little creature, who, of course, fell in love with him, and they were married."

"I don't think she is to be pitied," said Lady Helena, "if she be what her mother-in-law says, and those rich girls are always ugly or unrefined; no doubt, it is a great catch for her to have married your friend."

"I don't know," said Fortescue, slowly, "I never can find it in my heart to congratulate a woman on being married for her money, as I shrewdly suspect this one was."

"Ah, and how about the money, is it his or hers?"

"Oh! the guardian saw to that. Goldsmith—you know Goldsmith—he does things for Gerald, he has not chosen to give Fred the whip-hand, although I believe they have something handsome to start with; the rest is tied up till she's of age."

"Her guardian! why, Percy, it seems a pity you did not find out this treasure, instead of letting your friend get the start of you."

"Thank you, no. I don't think even gilded awkwardness and ignorance would reconcile me to either."

"At any rate, your friend is fortunate in some ways; if she's young, no doubt he does very much as he likes, but how long have they been married, and where are they now?"

"Mrs. Hallam was not explicit about dates; my own notion is that they were married early in the winter, and that he took her abroad at once; at any rate, they have only just returned, and are in lodgings in Gloucester Place. But Mrs. Hallam either would not, or could not, tell me the number. I think she repented having told me so much."

"Perhaps he means to polish his diamond a little before he introduces her," said Lady Helena, pityingly. "What a fate he has doomed himself to."

Captain Fortescue did not answer; he was unusually quiet during the rest of the evening, and as his brother went to sleep after dinner, his sister-in-law found him a dull companion, and was glad when he took his leave earlier than usual.

As he went down the steps, his mental exclamation betrayed where his thoughts had been wandering during the evening.

"I'll dine with them to-morrow."

When he reached his lodgings, he found a note on his table from Mrs. Hallam, begging him not to mention to any one anything she might have said in her agitation about her son's marriage,—at least anything unfavourable. She had felt so overpowered at having to communicate the intelligence to her beloved Frederick's dearest friend, that she feared she had said far more than she was justified in saying. She had only meant to express that her new daughter was rather unused to society. She heard she was very charming, quite what her son's wife ought to be, &c. &c. The letter ended by hinting that the young couple were so much devoted to each other at present, that they did not intend to visit.

Captain Fortescue's lip curled.

"You are a day too late, Mrs. Hallam, and unless Fred keeps his wife under lock and key, I prefer to judge her with my own eyes."

CHAPTER II.

MRS. FREDERIC HALLAM.

CAPTAIN FORTESCUE did dine next day in Gloucester Place. He went to call on Mr. Goldsmith to ascertain the truth of Mrs. Hallam's story, and met his friend coming out of the lawyer's office.

He thought Hallam tried to avoid him at first, but Fortescue was not going to be put off easily. His warm greeting and hearty congratulations were irresistible, and they were soon walking westward, arm-in-arm, on the old friendly terms.

Hallam scarcely mentioned his wife, and seemed rather anxious to avoid Fortescue's congratulations; after he had asked him to come to them at seven, and be introduced to Mrs. Hallam, he changed the subject so abruptly, that Fortescue could not return to it.

His curiosity was now fully roused, but he was confounded, when, instead of the awkward country bumpkin he expected to see, he was presented to a slender, gracefully-formed girl, whose deep mourning dress heightened the beauty of her very transparent complexion.

"By Jove, she's lovely!" he mentally exclaimed, as a second glance told him she had pretty eyes and delicate, well-cut features.

But what most surprised Fortescue, a fastidious judge of manner, was her calm self-possession and the repose of her attitude. There was no restlessness, no fidgeting, none of the awkward shyness of a country girl.

She was silent certainly, but a young bride is not expected to be talkative; she answered easily and naturally, however, when he spoke to her.

By-and-by, during the dinner, he noticed that, when spoken to by her husband, Mrs. Hallam's cheeks flushed, and an evident desire to please gave a nervous hesitation to her manner, and whenever this happened, Fortescue also remarked that his friend's cheerfulness seemed to flag, and that he became silent and pre-occupied. He knew or guessed how shy Hester was, and he was dreading that she would break down in utter confusion; but he had yet to learn the strength of will with which his wife controlled all outward manifestation of terror, for she felt really afraid of Captain Fortescue, knowing him to be the "grandest" as well as the most intimate of her husband's friends.

"Do you intend to live in town, Mrs. Hallam?"

"I hardly know yet," said Hester, and she looked across the table at her husband.

Hallam turned his head quickly to speak to the servant standing behind his chair, and Fortescue felt that the movement was intentional. He could not imagine what was the matter with his friend; it was impossible he could be ashamed of such a wife as that; he had never seen him in so unsocial a humour.

"Do you like London or the country?" he said to Mrs. Hallam.

"I don't know yet," she said, with a smile. "I have always lived in the country; London seems very black and dirty."

"You are in a dull part of town here; if you were nearer the parks you would like it better, but you will find plenty to amuse you soon—there will be all sorts of things going on in another week or so; the opera, balls, exhibitions, and so forth. I suppose, as you have lived in the country, the opera will be new to you?"

Hallam was listening now, and was evidently determined his wife should not answer.

"Ah, yes, Hester, we'll go to the opera some night soon. I hate lionizing with all my heart, it's an awful bore; but I don't mind the opera for once in a way."

Mrs. Hallam smiled up at her husband—she looked prettier than ever. Fortescue thought if he had so charming a wife, he should never be able to refuse her anything she wished for; when she looked at her husband, there was such an infinite trust and reverence mingled with the timid affection he had noticed at first.

Hallam was watching him, and was evidently gratified at the attention paid to his wife.

"I tell you what, Fortescue, you had better go with us to the opera. We'll have a box, you know, and then you'll tell Hester all about it; I'm a horrid fellow for taking people about; it bores me to death."

But it evidently was not the prospect of going to the opera that had so pleased Mrs. Hallam. She did not look vexed or disappointed now, but a shade came over the brightness of her face, and the timid, uncertain look returned.

Much as he liked to look at her, and interested as he felt, Fortescue was not sorry when she left the dinner-table. Hallam made no allusion to his wife or to his marriage, so his friend did

not like to mention either. Fred's thoughts seemed to be full of betting and making up a party for Tatton races.

"I thought new-married men gave up that sort of thing," said his friend, after listening to him for some time.

"What! races? Not a bit of it. Why, Hester's as fond of horses as I am, and takes quite an interest in them."

"I don't mean races, but betting. I've given it up although I'm not married, and if you'd take my advice, Fred, you'd do the same."

"Ah, it's all very well, my dear fellow: you've had your fling, and I'd have made you such a promise cheerfully six months ago; but, you see, times are altered now. It would be hard, indeed, to grudge me a little sport the first time I've had the chance of going into it properly. By George!" he said, rubbing his hands, and looking more like himself than he had done since the beginning of dinner, "it will be glorious. I say, old fellow, you'll go down too, won't you?"

"No," said Fortescue, laughing; "I tell you I've cut the whole concern, and I can't put myself in the way of temptation even for you, old fellow."

"Well, but if you go with me you may keep me out of mischief."

"You know better than that, Fred: you always take your own way, and pretend to take advice all the while. Besides, I'm not going to stand by with empty pockets and see you venturing your thousands, Mr. Millionnaire."

Hallam muttered something which sounded like "I wish they were thousands;" but they were just going upstairs, and his friend did not catch his distinct meaning.

He thought, for a newly-married man, Hallam was singularly inattentive to his wife. At the tea-table he had no little cares for her, and she seemed accustomed to dispense with them, and was rising to take her husband's tea-cup across the room when Fortescue offered his assistance. She thanked him in evident surprise.

"Ah, you'll spoil Hester," said Hallam, lazily, as he met Fortescue half-way and took the cup from him. "You see she doesn't care about that sort of thing."

"No," she answered. "I've always been used to wait on myself. I don't think I should like the trouble of many servants."

"Are servants a trouble?" said Fortescue, amused at her simplicity. "I hear people say so sometimes, but to me they seem to take all trouble off one's hands ——"

"You see," said Hallam, interposing; he was lying now full length on a sofa; "we've been living in hotels ever since we've been married, so we know nothing of housekeeping yet." He looked at his wife as he spoke, but she was pouring out another cup of tea and did not meet his eye.

"Well, perhaps I know nothing about it," she said, as if fearing she had spoken presumptuously. "I've never been used to more than one servant, so I don't know much about the trouble they give."

"Hester, are you ever going to give me another cup of tea?" said her husband, in a peremptory tone that seemed to startle her. She went for his cup at once, and Fortescue was too wise to relieve her of the trouble this time. She looked pale and nervous when she returned to her seat, and there was a perceptible restraint during the rest of the evening.

When Fortescue rose to go, Hallam said he should walk part of the way with him and have a cigar.

They walked on some time in silence, and then Fortescue said,—“How about the office, Fred; do you go there again now?”

“Not I; do you think I should ever have taken a wife, unless I could shake off desk slavery? no, I'm a free man for the rest of my life, barring old Goldsmith's interference.”

“Really; but I hoped you had done with him.”

“No such luck: the fact is, Percy,” he said, with more of his old frank manner than he had shown previously, “the old fellow has not used me fairly, I think. He set me all square to start, that was to his own advantage, as you know; but he's so managed matters, or he pretends that old Kirton so managed them, that not one penny can either my wife or I touch till she comes of age, without the old parchment's consent.”

“And how do you live at present?”

“Oh, he makes us a tolerable allowance; it would suit a moderate man like you, without encumbrance; but the truth is, I shall soon be as hard up as ever. At present my wife, of course, doesn't want money, which is lucky.”

Fortescue did not answer; he was wondering whether he could ever have consented to give up his independence and live on his wife's fortune.

“I say, Percy, don't be so strait-laced, but change your mind and go down with me. I've half promised to buy Hester a saddle-horse with some of my winnings; won't that be generous?”

Fortescue laughed.

"Ah, you don't see the generosity of buying her presents with her own money : but you forget,—what I gain by betting is my own, my own legitimate lawful earnings ; besides, I hold with the old saying, what's hers is mine and what's mine's my own."

He threw away the end of his cigar and twirled his long silky moustaches.

"And when Mrs. Hallam comes of age, how is the property settled then?"

"Oh—that was all done in the father's will : the money is absolutely tied on Hester and her children, not giving me even a life interest without her consent and Goldsmith's ; but of course I shall see that I have the control of the property then ; if people understand each other, you know, these things are easily settled between man and wife. I don't doubt Goldsmith, but I like to be my own master, and if he continues to manage affairs afterwards this might be difficult, and he might make mischief between me and Hester."

"I see, but will Mrs. Hallam consent to such a plan ? Do you know, in your place I should be glad that my wife's money was out of my power."

"Ah ; but then, Fortescue, you are romantic ; you always were. I am a calm, common-place—selfish if you like—man of business, and when I want money it seems to me pleasanter to find it in my own pocket than in any one else's ; besides, what can a woman know about business ? If you were in my place you'd think just as I do. It's one of the most wonderful things in human nature to me the way in which people's judgment always is biassed by the different position from which they look at things." This seemed to Frederic Hallam an unanswerable assertion.

"Hardly always ; there must be such things as abstract right and abstract wrong."

"I told you just now you were romantic, you jump so to extremes. There can be nothing wrong in any case that I was thinking of. If you study human nature a little you will find that self-interest is the universal law on which people found their opinions. I'm not talking of boys, but even in their case the same argument holds good : in betting for instance ; they think it advantageous—a good speculation—or they wouldn't do it."

"I don't think so ; they bet for the fun and excitement of the thing, and because others do it."

"Not a bit of it. Besides, my dear fellow, I was just going

to prove to you that it's nothing but self-interest—in other words, what we each think right—that makes you and me differ on this point: you, having outgrown the delusive visions of boyhood, see plainly that betting is too great a risk; I, on the contrary, being able to stand against the risk if I have ordinary luck, see in it a sure means of profit. It is wrong in your eyes because ruinous, and right in mine from the opposite reason; and, if you watch people closely, you will see this carried out in other things besides betting. 'What's one man's meat is another man's poison,' is true enough in many ways."

"Well," said his friend; he knew Fred too well to argue with him in one of these moods, "I shall bid you good-night, or Mrs. Hallam will forbid my visits if I keep her sitting up for you."

"Not she—she's in excellent training. My dear Fortescue, it must be a man's own fault if his wife sits up for him. Always begin your married life as you mean it to go on, and you'll find no trouble. A fellow must be a fool who can't manage his own wife."

He laughed with the happy self-consciousness of success in his own case, and, after shaking hands with his friend, walked home, meditating on his betting arrangements.

"I wish I could get Fortescue to go down with me," he said. "I don't half like the set I've got; but there's one comfort, I was never yet done in my life—they must be knowing hands to trick me, I think."

And then his thoughts went back to Goldsmith. He was not satisfied with that cautious gentleman's treatment of him—he must see him to-morrow.

Before the marriage, when money matters had been settled between them, the income that Goldsmith had named as sufficient for himself and his wife, till the latter came of age, had seemed to him then liberal and adequate; but since his return from the Continent he had discovered that it was quite impossible they could live on it—at any rate in London. He knew very well that Hester longed for a country life, and Goldsmith had hinted his willingness to purchase an estate for them before she attained her majority, if they would undertake to reside upon it; but the notion of sinking into a mere country squire was intolerable to Hallam. His wife was attentive, and dutiful, and loving, but to be shut up with her in a country house from month's end to month's end would be a penance he was resolved not to inflict on himself. As far as he could see, they had not a single pursuit or

sympathy in common, except that Hester was fond of riding. He smiled to himself as he wondered what pursuits or tastes she had; except reading and plain sewing, which he detested to see a woman engaged in, she did not appear to do anything like other women of her age. He had given her music lessons in Rome, but they seemed wasted—she had a defective ear both for time and tune, he had laughed at her failures, and she had soon given up. He was not sorry for it: he was an accomplished musician himself, and had a rich and highly-cultivated tenor voice, and he knew that Hester had wished to learn music that she might play the accompaniments of his songs—a notion which made him shudder when he found she was not acutely sensible of the difference in sound between one note and another. Had she persevered, possibly this faculty might in some degree have been cultivated. Her strong will would have helped much towards it, but at present that will was chained to her husband's liking: it was enough for her if he expressed disapproval, and, as he evidently shrank from her musical attempts, she discontinued them.

He proposed that she should have lessons in drawing, but she would not attempt this. She said when she and Lucy had tried together as children to copy the cows and pigs in the farmyard, Lucy's efforts had always succeeded, while hers had remained the most incomprehensible hieroglyphics; but she told him if he would let her take lessons in French and German, and give her a good English governess, she should be very thankful.

Hallam shrugged his shoulders at her want of taste; he thought accomplishments the most suitable pursuits for a lady. Study of any more earnest kind, he had always fancied detestable; however, it would serve to amuse her, and take her off his hands, for he found her a dull companion, and was always in terror when they were in Paris, or any frequented city, lest he should meet some English friends, and be compelled to introduce her to them, in her unfledged state, as he called it. So he told her she was welcome to do as she pleased, provided she did not grow clever and turn into a blue stocking.

Without reasoning the why and wherefore to himself, he felt that the money spent on these lessons had not been wasted. Her manner of speaking had greatly improved; but for that one little allusion to her home life, he had been surprised and pleased at her behaviour with Fortescue, a man whom of all others, he considered likely to make an uncouth person nervous, from the excessive courtesy of his own manner.

He might have known if he had reflected—for Frederic Hallam had plenty of sense, although he chose his own way of using it—that probably his friend's extreme deference and courtesy to Hester had done more to give her self-possession than any mental effort on her own part. The pleasure of being appreciated before her husband, and by his particular friend, had made her very happy.

Hallam wondered if she would be as collected if he took her to see his mother; if so, the sooner it was over the better. He had that morning received a note inviting him to do so, and hinting that after what he had said of his wife, perhaps the more she saw of her mother-in-law the better. The note had not pleased him, and he had destroyed it without comment, although Hester had looked up expectantly, when he said it was from his mother. Suppose he took her there to-morrow, and if they seemed to get on pretty well together, left her there for the day. Of course he should not do so if the poor girl seemed shy or frightened, for Frederic Hallam meant to be an exemplary husband—from his point of view—and as to being unkind to Hester, he was determined that he would neither be so himself, nor permit it in others; no, not even in his mother, and the sooner she knew it the better. Of course he must check his wife, and reprove her for such a *gaucherie* as she had committed this evening, and he was not afraid that, once warned, she would make the same mistake again.

But then there was Goldsmith to be seen after. How could he take Hester to Wilton Place, and see him as well, for Mrs. Hallam had expressly said he was to bring his wife in the morning, and he knew her too well to transgress in a trifling matter of time or place, although he would not have hesitated about anything more serious.

“This comes of getting married,” he said, as he opened the door with his latch-key; “it is such a bore to have to take women anywhere.”

CHAPTER III.

THE SHADOW OF A CLOUD.

HESTER had attained her wish: she was married to a man whom she loved, and she was fast gaining, by undaunted perseverance and energy, the educational advantages she had so longed for.

When she found her father was indeed taken from her, the first impulse, when she recovered from this sudden blow, had been to write to her uncle and aunt Wrenshaw ; she never thought of Mr. Goldsmith, but Mr. Wrenshaw did ; and before he obeyed his niece's summons, he sent the sudden news on to the lawyer, justly imagining that he knew more of Kirton's affairs than any one else, and probably would have to settle them.

Mr. Goldsmith reached Kirton's Farm nearly as soon as the Wrenshaws did, and very speedily announced to them that he was appointed Hester's sole guardian, and that until she was of age she was to reside with him and with his sisters, and, he was very sorry to add, on no account to be allowed to visit any of her relatives. Mr. Wrenshaw looked both surprised and grieved to hear this : but all other feelings were soon merged in the intense surprise with which both he and his wife heard the amount of Kirton's wealth ; it seemed fabulous that a man who had lived as he had done, should have amassed such a fortune.

By his will, Hester was to have a yearly income till she came of age, subject to Mr. Goldsmith's regulation, and although, in the event of her marriage, the property was settled unreservedly on herself and any children she might have, still she was advised in all matters to be guided by him. It seemed to Goldsmith's practised eye, when he examined the papers in the study, that his old friend had been seized by death in the act of adding some codicil to his will, although there was nothing beyond the heading of the sheet of paper before him on the desk to support such a conjecture.

For a man who had so doubted mankind, his trust in Goldsmith appeared remarkable ; the best solution to it lay in the good opinion Kirton had held of the strength of his own constitution, spite of the warnings he had had frequently of late. He was persuaded that the strange feeling about his heart arose from indigestion, and that he should outlive all his contemporaries, very likely those younger, including Hester herself. It may seem an unusual feeling for a father to have had with regard to a child ; but Kirton never felt so little affection for Hester as when he looked upon her as the destined heir of his dearly cherished unknown riches ; he almost hated her then ; it was far pleasanter to contemplate himself as her probable survivor.

Mr. Goldsmith was civil and urbane to Hester's uncle and aunt—begged them to take their own time about remaining—to make themselves perfectly at home ; but it was so evident that he

was, and considered himself, master there, that, spite of her unwillingness to leave poor Hester, Mrs. Wrenshaw, after a few days, consented to her husband's wish that they should return home.

"And do you remark," said the irate old gentleman, when they were seated in the fly which was to convey them to the station—for Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw and Lucy were still with them, and were keeping house in their absence, so they had no excuse for remaining at Stedding—"that the smooth-tongued old Jew of a fellow never once asked us to go and see Hester when she lives in London? But I shall go, I can tell him; I shall just make sure the child's properly treated."

But things happened adversely.

When the Wrenshaws returned to town they found Mrs. Frank bent on taking Lucy to Paris, and they were easily persuaded to accompany them. Jacob Bonham came over and fetched the two Stedding ladies home again; but Mr. Wrenshaw was so delighted with all he saw in Paris that he persuaded his wife to winter there—Jacob Bonham having undertaken that a friend of his should occupy the Wrenshaws' London house during their absence.

Mrs. Wrenshaw's heart ached to think of Hester left alone among strangers; but her husband said he believed she would get on better with the Goldsmiths, if she were left alone with them at first, especially as that clause in her father's will had forbidden intercourse with her relations.

But Hester was not destined to have much acquaintance with the Miss Goldsmiths.

She begged so hard to stay at Kirton's Farm, that Goldsmith consented she should remain there for a few weeks. It need scarcely be said that Mr. Hallam soon made his appearance, at first apparently to help Mr. Goldsmith, but soon as a friend of Hester's.

When next it was proposed that she should take up her abode in the lawyer's house in Regent's Park, she consented without reluctance. The dulness and restraint were far more irksome than anything she had felt at Kirton's Farm, but all was forgotten in the sunlight of Hallam's presence. He was a tolerably attentive lover, and she had very soon promised to be his wife, and then he persuaded her that the education she so longed for would progress far more speedily on the Continent than in England, and that by waiting till the year of her mourning was fulfilled, she would be losing valuable time; in short, his eloquence was irresistible.

Hester had felt aggrieved with her aunts, and with Lucy, for going abroad just when she had needed their sympathy; and Mr. Goldsmith took good care that she should not hear from them; so that after sending two letters to Lucy, which never reached their destination, as Goldsmith led her to believe her cousin was still abroad, Hester gave up writing in proud resentment at their unkindness and neglect.

So the first news her relations heard of Hester, was that sent by her at a venture to her cousin Lucy, at Stedding. She was to marry Mr. Frederick Hallam in a fortnight, and would wish her cousin to be her bridesmaid; but as Mrs. Wrenshaw was not asked to accompany her daughter, and the letter was very formal and cold, she refused to allow Lucy to go. She thought a child's wedding, so soon after her father's death—hardly three months—most indecorous and improper; and Lucy was so busy just then in preparing for her own marriage, that she scarcely regretted her mother's prohibition to attend Hester's, although, as she said, it seemed sad for the poor girl to be married among strangers. But Jacob did not leave her much leisure to think of other people; he was always in Duke Street, and at last Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw wrote to her brother and sister in Paris that she really thought they had better make haste and come over, as Mr. Bonham seemed in a hurry to be married, and so far as his patients were concerned, she thought it would be a good thing over, for he neglected them sadly, and she was sure somebody would be poisoned some day with a wrong dose of physic.

So that, although Hester received congratulatory letters from all her friends, she did not see any of them before she went to Italy with her husband; and although Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw felt anxious about the husband she had chosen, they were so full of Lucy and her happiness, that their thoughts were naturally diverted from a niece who appeared to care so little to keep up any intercourse with them.

It was a relief to learn from Lucy that Mr. Hallam was an old acquaintance, one who had loved Hester before she was known to be an heiress. She did not think it necessary to mention his letter to her, and it comforted her uncle and aunt greatly, that she had not fallen a prey to some designing fortune-hunter.

Mr. Wrenshaw was not a man who listened to evil reports, and he told his wife that although he had a personal dislike to Goldsmith, from his Jewish appearance and oily ways, he believed him to be a respectable man, and his sisters good religious

women. In her own mind Mrs. Wrenshaw doubted, from what she heard of them, whether these ladies would influence Hester for good. She had not been brought up to think much of religion, and good as the Miss Goldsmiths really were, and beneficial, doubtless, as their doctrines were to themselves, her aunt felt almost sure that she would dislike to have all daily talk salted with texts, and to have tracts and "words in season" crammed into her pockets and her ears on every occasion.

And Mrs. Wrenshaw was right. Spite of her unimaginative practical mind, Hester had a keen admiration of the beautiful; it was not essential to her happiness, as it would have been had she been gifted with a more vivid fancy, or more intense powers of enjoyment. Still the aspect of the two Miss Goldsmiths was so repelling as almost to disgust her on her first introduction to them; they abjured all vanities; among others, that of wearing any cap or head-dress; but even then, as Hester thought, they might have braided their hair smoothly, instead of wearing it in rough untidy curls, which looked as if a hungry dog had been trying to make his dinner off them. They were kind, but they looked shocked and distressed when they found that she was ignorant of all that they considered indispensable. Unfortunately, they had a talent for preaching in chorus, and as each tried to be heard, she waxed more and more dogmatic, till they enlisted Hester's obstinacy against them; and when once she had made up her mind they were wrong, they might go on talking for ever. She could sit there in silence certainly, but deaf to all that was being said on each side of her.

She found ready sympathy in Mr. Hallam, who used to turn "the old prigs," as he called them, and their opinions, into far greater ridicule than Hester would have dreamed of—for she shrank from laughing at holy things as much as she did from hearing them made the subject of common talk. With all her self-will, there was reverence in her nature, as there is in all deep natures, and it had safe shyness about a careless handling of sacred words and things. But as yet the shyness went much too far: religion was to her an abstract quality, detached from daily life altogether; she meant to be religious some day, when she grew older, and should understand more about it; but there it stopped, and she was quite sure she could never take to such a religion as the Miss Goldsmiths'.

Poor, good women! how little they knew the harm they were doing; for, naturally as Hester talked about them to Hallam, she

found it impossible not to laugh at his ridicule of them, and, by degrees, she joined him ; he must be right in all he said and did, he was so sweet-tempered, so generous, so much better than she was ; he was religious enough for a young man ; and thus, gradually, the awful feelings about death and a future state, which her father's sudden death had stirred in her heart, faded away as this world and its delights became each day more real and dear to her.

As women are, Hester was just the woman for such a man as Hallam to have married if he had truly loved her. She was not troubled with Lucy's ardent nature, nor was she very exacting of small attentions, but she was watchful and observant and of a jealous disposition, and she soon noticed when he began to leave her more and more to herself ; though it cut her to the heart, she loved him too much to resent it ; she felt her ignorance and awkward ways annoyed him, and studied harder than ever to improve herself. Her pride, too, prevented her from being troublesome. When they were abroad, he always told her that the museums and picture-galleries she so much wished to visit would give her no pleasure until she was better versed in the associations connected with them, and he seemed to be afraid, when there, that she would say or do something to betray her ignorance.

Hester was always humble on this point : she was too real not to acknowledge the great difference of education between herself and her husband. Sometimes his decisions surprised her ; she thought that she should have acted differently under such circumstances, but these were only thoughts, they never took the shape of suggestions. And fortunately for her that they did not ; for, with all his good temper, Frederic Hallam was the last man who would have brooked interference with his opinions. She used to think at first that these ideas of hers resulted from ignorance ; but as her intellect developed each day more rapidly, as it brightened more and more from the rust its long idleness had accumulated, her judgment became also more acute and defined, and she felt that in some way or other her husband's affection had become alienated from her.

He had made so many protestations of his love at the time of their engagement, that although she had always secretly wished for more assurances after marriage, she had told herself she ought to be satisfied, trying to feel persuaded that, when she was more his equal, he would think better of her ; and sometimes she thought this

longing for greater love was what she had heard called romantic when she was at school—for Hester seldom read novels.

But, since her return to London, she had not been nearly so happy. She had received two letters from Lucy, and the description of her happiness was so intense, so glowing, that it made her cousin's heart ache.

She gave one of the letters to Frederic to read, but, after getting through the first page, he had laughed and said it smelt so strongly of bread-and-butter he could not stand it.

Hester looked up surprised.

"I mean it reads school-girlish, a sort of got-up thing; I'm quite sure you'd have too much sense to write such romantic nonsense."

He did not look at Hester as he said this, or her sorrowful expression would surely not have escaped him. She was thinking how different must be her description of her husband's love for her, for Lucy's letter was all Jacob and his love from beginning to end.

On the morning after Captain Fortescue's visit, Hester heard again from her cousin; she did not offer her husband this letter to read—he was deep in his favourite *Bell's Life*. However, he listened when she spoke to him.

"Frederic, do you know that Lucy—of course, I mean Mr. Bonham, too—wishes us to go and spend a few days with them soon?"

"Quite impossible, my dear, as far as I'm concerned, at present."

"Ah, but there is no need to answer directly, as she says she shall send a proper invitation when they are ready for us."

"It would be a great pity to ask us before," said Hallam, laughing; "but, Hester, I want you to go out with me this morning."

Her face was radiant in an instant, and without any of her usual calm restraint, she went up to him and kissed him.

"There," he said, patting her on the shoulder, still good-humouredly, but with much of the action with which we check the over-fondness of an affectionate spaniel, "sit down on the sofa, like a good girl, and I'll tell you all about it. Oh, stop, just let me see what this is," as a paragraph at the end of the column next the one he had been reading, caught his eye.

Hester pressed her lips together: she looked strangely like her father at this moment; but Hallam had finished his paragraph, and went on speaking.

"Look here, I want to take you to call on my mother; there now, don't look frightened, because you needn't be a bit. I thought you managed famously yesterday. I've not said we're going, and so she won't be expecting us. I hate all ridiculous fusses, and so do you, I know. Put on a nice dress, that's all, and your last new bonnet; you look best in that."

Hester did not answer; she stood beside him, thinking.

"Why, what's the matter, child? don't you want to go?" he said, impatiently.

"You said a week ago, Fred, that you did not mean to let your mother see me at present. You should wait till we had a house of our own. I thought, from what you said, she would not perhaps care to see me yet. I should not like to go, unless she is willing I should do so."

"Now, don't be silly, Hester, like other women, and take up a prejudice against your mother-in-law, just because she is your mother-in-law. You must like my mother, you cannot help it, she is so fond of me."

"I will try," said Hester, with a bright smile at his last words, and she went to change her dress.

She shrank from the idea of this visit with more than her accustomed shyness. Supposing—and this was sure to be the case—that Frederic's mother thought her quite unworthy of him—her idol. It was one thing to think this herself, and quite another to bear it from another person.

She stood before her looking-glass, puzzled by the new and strange feelings that rose within her, and yet they were more strange than new. The defiant, haughty spirit, which had formerly broken out in rare but, when it did show itself, intense rebellion to her father's will, now asserted itself, and made her believe, against all her best efforts, that it would be impossible for her to conciliate her husband's mother, or appear to any advantage before her. It is, perhaps, the most unlucky foreboding that can possess any woman, because it is sure to come true. Vanity has probably something to do with it, but not all: there is a worthier emotion mingled, when, as in Hester's case, there is the consciousness that the best and noblest feelings have been rudely checked; that when the heart was full of frank, generous love, which, if it had been as freely received and transplanted into a kindred soil, would have taken ineradicable hold there, it has, on the contrary, been choked by the cold indifference thrown on it; even if it has escaped the more sudden withering of dislike and contempt.

A withering, not like that of autumn leaves, for this knows no spring of renewed growth ; it is not sullenness, it is not pride ; a very warm, loving disposition, meek as well as gentle-willed, may sometimes succeed in overcoming the shrinking human nature has from offering again what has been once unkindly rejected, and be beloved at last in return ; but even then, there will never be the confidence, the same power of spreading out the treasures of one's heart in the sunshine of a truly appreciating affection ; there will always be a certain amount of timid mistrust. If mothers-in-law would ponder this, and take their sons' wives to their hearts at once, not expecting to find them faultless, but fondly accepting them, faults and all, as now and for ever the same flesh and blood as their husbands, their equals in all things so far as man and woman can be equals ; how much future sorrow they would many of them spare themselves. How truly would they gain for ever two children, instead of losing one, for if a man loves a woman as he ought to love his wife, his future affection for his mother is mainly influenced by her conduct to her daughter-in-law at the outset.

And Mrs. Hallam's had been very unkind. She knew nothing of the real objections to her son's marriage—that his heart was not interested, although this probably she would have said mattered little, provided the match was a good one—good, standing for rich in her vocabulary—and suitable in other ways ; nor did she know from personal observation, that Hester was ignorant and unformed in manner ; but she was so excessively angry and annoyed to find that her son had actually engaged himself to a girl whom she had never seen, and whose family and connections were not to be talked about, that she refused to be present at the marriage.

The story she had told to Fortescue about Hester was partly imaginary, partly from the gossip of a mutual friend, who had called on Mr. Goldsmith during the engagement, and had been introduced to Hester.

In his heart Frederic Hallam was just as well pleased that Hester should have a little time for improvement and softening down before his mother saw her ; but still he resented the refusal, and thought it in very bad taste. He invited his aunt ; she was far more cordial, although she reproached him with his mysterious ways ; she said she should like to see Miss Kirton very much if Fred would bring her to call, but she could not become acquainted with the Miss Goldsmiths, and this must happen if she called in Regent's Park, or attended the wedding.

Hallam was not sorry, but he affected to be huffed in the note he wrote in answer, and said he could not now introduce her to her niece till their return to London.

He had no fear about his aunt becoming reconciled ; she was not thoroughly selfish, and if he seemed happy as a married man, he thought she would be sure to behave well to Hester.

The notion that there were two sides to the question—that Hester might not choose to be tolerated and patronized—had never once occurred to him.

At her own request, she had written to her mother-in-law soon after her marriage ; she had so longed all her life for a mother, that she was resolved not to give up the chance of winning Mrs. Hallam's affection without an effort ; the letter was plain, straight-forward, and sensible—like all Hester did or said—but the handwriting was cramped and the wording ungraceful ; her husband offered to compose a letter for her, but her thorough honesty came in the way of her desire to please, and gained the day.

A large-hearted woman would have prized and fostered such an overture, but there was nothing large about Mrs. Hallam senior, mentally or morally ; she pronounced the letter ill-bred and presuming, and never replied to it, except by commenting on it to her son, imagining or pretending to imagine him ignorant of it : she apparently forgot how much more really ill-bred this was than poor Hester's letter.

Hester was by no means gentle-willed, and when she had said she would try to like her mother-in-law, she knew she could make no spontaneous advances ; once repelled, hers was not a nature ever to risk a second rebuff ; now she wished anything would happen to prevent this dreaded meeting ; she felt as hard as a stone.

“But after all,” she thought, “it is better over ; after the first I shall not care about it, and it will be so delightful to have a long walk with Fred.”

Her eyes fell on the looking-glass, and she smiled with pleasure that she looked so well that morning, just when Fred could not help looking at her as they walked together. She had never thought herself handsome till he had taught her to do so, and now she valued her beauty, not as some women do, to be displayed to the utmost possible extent to all beholders, but as something belonging to her husband, a treasure that she must be careful of, because it was his,

After she was dressed she stood a few moments thinking of Fred ; how wonderful his love for her must have been, that not even her ignorance nor her poverty-stricken appearance had checked its ardour. She ought never to be dissatisfied with him or his ways, when she thought of the immense sacrifice he had made in marrying her ; what a true proof of his love he had given in that, whereas she had nothing but gain on her side.

At any rate she could and would try to-day not to say anything about her former domestic life, and so offend him as she had done the previous evening.

She was rather disappointed to find they were not to walk. Her husband had sent for a carriage while she was upstairs ; he had told her she should have one of her own soon ; but the longer he stayed in London, the more certain he was that they could not manage with their present income ; therefore, any large extra expense would be imprudent, until Goldsmith became more reasonable ; besides, he really meant to buy Hester a horse out of his anticipated winnings at the races, and one for Martin. He had one of his own, of course, a man could not get along without a horse ; but she would soon have hers now, and then she would be independent.

He was very silent during their drive ; he had rarely been so long without seeing his mother, and, although the tone of her yesterday's note had not pleased him, he felt a natural yearning to be friends with her again.

The drawing-room was empty when they were ushered into it. Hester looked perfectly calm and self-possessed, but she could not see anything distinctly at first, so great was her inward agitation.

I do not suppose, to a timid person, there is any mental agony to equal a visit of this kind, to one you are anxious to stand well with, and who, you feel more than half sure, has prejudged you unfavourably ; but, to a woman, if there be any depth in her character, it seldom occurs without working a change. The intense mental effort at self-control hardens the whole nature, the will especially ; it may be a strengthening—it is not a beneficial process.

Her husband looked kindly at her, and pointed out some water-colour sketches and likenesses, dispersed about the rooms—she could not see anything clearly ; her sight seemed dim, and her senses confused.

A moment more—the door opened, and rustling silk entered.

She saw her husband spring forward to meet a lady, who threw her arms round him and kissed him with elaborate tenderness; then they both came towards her. Her husband took her hand, pride was forgotten, and she looked up in his mother's face with a timid, imploring look; she could not help feeling daughter-like, spite of the rebuff she had received.

She saw a pretty, silly face, trying to look imposing and dignified; and as Hester leant forward for a mother's kiss, Mrs. Hallam just touched her forehead with her lips, saying as she did so,—“I hope you will make my son happy.”

There was perhaps nothing in the words to give offence, and yet they checked Hester's good resolutions completely, and froze the warm, rising feeling. They were words not spoken impulsively, but sounded as though got up for the occasion. Much as she loved her husband, it seemed to Hester that happiness ought not to be one-sided in marriage; that it was his duty to make her happy, too. Perhaps this is often the corner-stone of mischief between mothers-in-law and their daughters-in-law; they show plainly a doubt whether the young wives will make their sons happy—whether they are, in fact, good enough for them; *ces choses se pensent*: probably all good, loving wives will own themselves inferior to, and undeserving of, their husbands; but then as long as we are subject to human infirmity, it is one thing to confess, another to be accused. In all human relations, the secret of dislikes and disagreements is, that we all forget Adam's fall, and judge each other as angelic, not as human beings. It was plain to Hester that her husband's mother did not look on her as a daughter.

And then they all sat down, and there was a pause.

“I got your note yesterday, mother,” said Hallam, “so I thought we would come over early, and be sure to find you in. What are you going to do with yourself to-day?”

He had settled in his own mind that he should leave Hester in Wilton Place; his mother could easily take or send her home; it would be a good opportunity for them to see a little of each other, but her answer disarranged his plans.

“I have friends coming to luncheon,” said Mrs. Hallam, “and we are all going to the flower-show afterwards.”

“By Jove! I quite forgot the *fête*. I say, Hester, you'd like to go, wouldn't you?” he said, after a pause; “who are the people going with you, mother?”

“Lady Hilsdeen and that elegant girl of hers: you must

remember her, surely, Frederic, and we are to meet Sir John and Lady Fletcher at the gardens."

"Well, then, you'll just have room for one; I wish you'd chaperone Hester. She has not been anywhere yet, and I'm sure her bonnet will do. Let me look at you, child; she only wants a gayer parasol and gloves, to be all right; but I'll choose those for her in some shop or other, and send them here as I go back; she'll do then, won't she?" he added, seeing how disturbed his mother looked.

"My dear, I was not thinking about your wife's dress," said his mother, in a voice with a good deal of reproach in it. "I should be very glad to be of service to her in any way, and if you could accompany us it would do very well, but already we shall be four ladies to one gentleman, and ——"

Hester had walked up to her husband; she felt too much annoyed to be any longer timid.

"Fred, I would rather go home with you: I do not care for this flower-show."

It was said in the old, hard, abrupt way he had scarcely noticed in her since their marriage, and Frederic Hallam started. What would his mother think?

"Still," continued Mrs. Hallam, as if there had been no interruption, although she had also started at the determined voice, "if you cannot go, Frederic, I will take care of your wife, if you particularly wish it."

There was a grandeur of benevolence in her face as she spoke, from which even a meeker spirit than Hester's might have shrunk.

"No, thank you," she said, looking straight before her in the awkward, dogged way in which shy people often offend, forgetting how a smile in the face of the person addressed will smooth away the hardness of words; "I will not be a trouble to you, and I had rather not go without Frederic."

Mrs. Hallam smiled in a superior and pitying manner. Hallam would have remonstrated with his wife, but this smile stopped him. He put a strong restraint on himself, and walked to the window, and looked into the street for a minute. However annoyed he might feel just then his mother should not see it.

"Well, then, Hester," he said, "we won't hinder my mother: perhaps it's as well you don't go. When will you come and see us, mother?" he said to Mrs. Hallam.

“ You must dine with me first, you know,” she said. “ Come one day soon, and I will ask your aunt Martha to meet you.”

When this was settled, they parted, and this time Mrs. Hallam withheld her glacial kiss, nor did Hester make any movement to show she expected it.

CHAPTER IV.

LUCY'S LECTURE.

Mr., or, as he was called by the country people, Dr. Bonham (a distinction, by the way, which he might have attained easily enough had he cared about it) lived in a comfortable, old-fashioned, red-brick house in the best part of the High Street, Stedding—one of those quaint, peculiarly English-looking houses, suggestive of Christmas cheer, and every other sort of national geniality. It had a stone cornice and quoins, and a carved semi-circular door-heading, which, projecting from the face of the wall, and being also deeply recessed, looked like a huge camar shell, and made a snug resting-place for the chrysalides of garden whites and other adventurous butterflies, hidden by the deep mass of shadow in which it lay—a shadow which struck the eye vividly when the full blaze of sunshine fell on the outward semi-circular moulding—a shadow into which one longed to creep for cool refreshment in real midsummer weather.

The door-stone was raised two steps above the level of the street, but then you stepped down again into the hall, looking like a great chess-board with its squares of black and white marble ; a ponderous brass knocker glistened in the centre of the door, requiring some strength of wrist to raise it. On either side the hall was a handsome square room—one the dining-room, the other, on the right, Jacob had had divided, and kept one-half nearest the hall for his library and writing-room, and the other for his surgery, with a separate street entrance.

The staircase on the right side of the hall was broad and easy-going, of dark oak, uncarpeted and very slippery, one short flight sweeping half round at the top, and leading by a broad passage to a square landing hung with engravings and photographs. Opening from this was the drawing-room, a pretty, tasteful place, with nothing handsome or costly about it, but so arranged as to set everything in the room in the best possible light.

All strangers who entered the room for the first time remarked with surprise that, although the hall and front rooms were almost on a level with the street, from the drawing-room windows, which opened to the ground, you stepped easily on to the lawn, sloping for some distance in the midst of the pretty garden. The truth was that the garden was raised artificially till it met the rising ground beyond, and thus the flowers in it had the advantage of a far purer atmosphere than would have been the case, had it been below instead of on a level with the chimneys of the lower part of the town. As yet, flowers were scarce, but bushes of red and white lilac, long ringlets of golden laburnum, and the snowy masses of gueldres rose looked lovely in the spring sunshine. These were in the shrubberies on either side, but on the lawn itself in the distance stood a red and a white hawthorn, and nearer the windows a standard double-blossomed cherry-tree covered with its exquisite flowers.

But pretty as the garden view was from the drawing-room, Lucy seldom sat there. Her favourite place of occupation was her husband's study, and here on this May morning she was sitting diligently working at a shapeless piece of French cambric, on part of which she was sewing some delicate lace. Jacob stood leaning on the mantelpiece, gazing admiringly at her and her work, and, I am sorry to say, doing nothing else. She did not raise her eyes, but sat there apparently unconscious of his presence for a few minutes, only with a graver face than usual.

"What makes you so silent, my pet?" he said at last, tired of waiting for her to look up; for he believed in the soft spell which forces the person you love to meet your eye if you only look lovingly and long enough; he had found it always so true with Lucy, hitherto, that he thought she must have some reason for not looking up. They had been married four months, but their honeymoon was not nearly ended yet. To some husbands and wives, life itself is one enduring honeymoon, which outward trials cannot embitter. Lucy looked at him now, but there was a shade of sadness in her beautiful eyes.

"Why, I have been thinking for several days past that I have been wrong, Jacob."

"Wrong! you are never wrong, you know; let us hear this wonderful secret."

"I don't like to tell you, and yet I must, dearest." She threw her work on the table, and going up to her husband, put both her arms round him, and leant her head against him. "I

have been wrong in thinking you were so, and not telling you of it. She just glanced up, and seeing his colour rise, she went on quickly: "Don't be vexed, darling, now I have said so much I must go on. I think you ought to go your daily round earlier: for if you started at nine instead of eleven, you would be back sooner for dinner, and then you could start again earlier in the afternoon, and all those poor people who come for their medicine in the evening need not be kept waiting; that boy in the surgery never begins anything till you come back, I believe."

"I did not think you would have tired of me so soon, Lucy," he said, reproachfully, holding himself straight upright, so as not in any way to return her caress; for the time he felt quite hardened against her.

"Oh, Jacob! now if you are going to be naughty, the very first time I find fault with you the least bit, I've done; but it seemed to me dishonest to be thinking this of you, and not to say it."

"Which comes to this," he said, disengaging himself and walking away from her, thoroughly vexed, "that you consider it necessary to teach me how to manage my business; many a wife would rejoice in a husband who loved her so much that he could not bear to leave her; but I suppose you have taken it into your head it is idleness."

He was turning to leave the room. Poor Lucy had begun to cry quietly at these first unkind words from her husband, but she looked up again now.

"You are really angry with me, Jacob, and perhaps I spoke in a foolish hasty way; but indeed, indeed, I would like to keep you here all day, if I did not think it wrong;" then seeing that he was still going away, she darted forward and caught his arm. "Jacob, you are not going without saying you forgive me—suppose anything happened while we were apart to either of us—oh, you darling, you could not, could you?"

Jacob bent down and kissed her, but not heartily; his pride had received a deep wound. It cannot be denied, he had rather a sulky temper if interfered with, although generally he was very forbearing. She came to the door, as she always did when the gig was brought round, and her heart seemed to be trying to leap out through her eyes in the farewell glances she gave him, but she saw he was angry with her still.

And yet Lucy was right. Jacob had been sadly neglecting his business ever since his marriage. Every week he got more lax,

and both visits and medicine had fallen sadly into arrears. Lucy saw all this, and her remarkable quickness fully appreciated what the results might be ; her vivid imagination already painted a rival doctor stepping into Jacob's practice, and besides all this, for Lucy was not mercenary, it seemed to her that work of one kind or another was what mankind was sent on earth to do, and *that* work was safest and best which belonged to our lawful calling ; enjoyment and relaxation were good slaves, but evil masters. Apart from this, Lucy's fears would have been justifiable, had they been influenced by pecuniary reasons. The greater part of his father's money Jacob had expended in the purchase of the practice, and of the house and grounds they now occupied. They were living with the utmost prudence and economy, with only one maid-servant, Jacob of course having to keep a groom ; but before very long there would be fresh expenses, and another servant must be kept. Lucy did not calculate all this ; it was not in her nature to anticipate evil ; but she felt strongly that her husband was not doing his duty, and she had worked herself up to the belief that she ought to tell him so.

Perhaps she might have been less abrupt, but there are men—and among the best living—who are always slightly irritated when first told of their faults ; so perhaps the way of doing it does not much matter, so long as it is a loving way.

Lucy felt more unhappy than she had done since her marriage ; she was vexed with Jacob and disappointed in him, too. She had learned to consider him perfect, and now her idol was flawed ; but this mood soon changed, and she felt she had been to blame for her idol worship. Must he not be human, and beset with infirmities like other human beings ? Lucy had had the benefit of her aunt Wrenshaw's occasional teaching while she was at her London school—a greater aid to her married happiness than she was probably aware of. And now she was able to put this teaching to a practical use ; for, with her warm temperament and love of romantic reading, she would probably have expected her husband to be on all occasions as faultless a paragon of manhood as King Arthur himself. When one looks some years back, one wonders how the young women who smiled and wept over the perfections of Sir Charles Grandison, Thaddeus of Warsaw, and Lord Orville, could have ever reconciled themselves to human husbands at all. But as language-masters tell us we can only acquire correct pronunciation from having it taught us in a slightly exaggerated manner, perhaps even the *tête exaltée* ex-

pectations these types of husbands created were preferable to the matter-of-fact, too practical views of girls now-a-days. Romance, at any rate, cannot be laid to their charge; the great fear is, that as the demand for chivalry becomes extinguished, the virtue itself will also become extinct in England, as it has long ago in France.

Lucy grew more and more vexed with herself, as she remembered how beautifully Jacob had read the *Miller's Daughter* to her that very morning—he had certainly stayed at home an hour after that—but what right had she to keep guard over her husband, and measure out his time for him? She was getting quite spoiled, and should soon be what she held in horror, a “set-you-to-rights,” strong-minded woman. She cried a little more, and then went on with her needlework, quite oblivious of all the sage reasons by which she had persuaded herself into scolding her husband, as she called it, and resolving to have it comfortably out with him as soon as he returned.

She had lost all traces of tears by the time her mother looked in to pay her daily visit. There was a troubled look on Mrs. Wrenshaw's comely face, that instantly roused Lucy's attention.

“What is the matter, mamma? you look as if something had happened.”

“Well, my dear,”—Mrs. Wrenshaw untied her bonnet strings and threw them wide apart, a favourite habit when heated with walking—“it's this alarm about vaccination really quite flusters me.”

“You mean about small-pox,” said Lucy; “Jacob is vexed with you because you won't be vaccinated; he says it's selfish of any one who has not had the disease not to undergo vaccination.”

“Well, I know,” poor Mrs. Wrenshaw looked greatly perplexed; “he told me as much last Sunday; but then, as Jemima Skipper says, it's one thing to be done from the cow direct, and another from these babies. She says—and she's clever, you know, Lucy—don't you remember those little blue paper books she wrote—that these babies are all worn out, and they may fill us full of all sorts of horrors. No, I can't, and you may tell Jacob; I'll have nothing worn-out vaccinated into me; nothing but a good healthy cow.”

Lucy laughed, and assured her mother that if she would change her mind, Jacob would undertake to find a nice healthy baby.

But she only shook her head, and declared her intention of

abiding by Jemima's opinion, and then she examined and admired Lucy's needlework.

"Oh! by-the-by," she said suddenly, as she sat pinching up the lace round the little sleeves between her thumb and finger, to make it lie flat, "I knew I had something to tell you: old Biz came to see me yesterday; she goes on against your poor uncle Kirton worse than ever."

"I'm very sorry," said Lucy, "because I'm afraid she'll get a habit of doing it, even when she sees Hester."

"Well, I don't know if it's fair to blame her, I'm sure; but it does seem hard, when she'd served him faithfully for thirteen years, and really, poor old soul, did try to make the best of things, that he should have left her a paltry five pounds."

"He probably expected that Hester would do as she has done. Jacob says she ought to be very comfortable all her life on such an allowance."

"Not a bit of it, my dear; Biz knew all about the will, as every one else did. Why, it was town-talk, child, and every one's impression was, that your uncle expected to outlive both Hester and that Goldfinch. I don't wonder at the old creature being rusty about it; though I'll own it's bad taste to be always speaking against the dead. It makes one shiver to think what she may say of one, when one's in one's coffin."

"Well, but, mamma dear, it won't much matter what Biz says of any one; she's known to be cross and crabbed."

"Lucy, my dear, I'm surprised at you; it must always matter a great deal what every one says of us; why, we might as well all be Mrs. Jones at once."

"Poor Mrs. Jones! do you know, Jacob says, she is a very nice woman, and that if people avoided her less, she would be less eccentric?"

"Ah! pack o' nonsense! I've no patience with Jacob, he's just like all the men; if a woman's got a pretty face, or even a clever tongue—for Mrs. Jones is none so pretty—she may do what she pleases. I don't hold with widows, and I never did, as you know, Lucy; one of the things I felt in losing your poor dear father, was that it left me a widow, and I should grow foolish like the rest of 'em. But really, Lucy, don't you have anything to say to Mrs. Jones—things are getting serious in that quarter."

"Why, has she been giving away any more dinners?"

"I don't know anything about dinners," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, looking very virtuous and incredulous.

“ Oh, yes, mamma, only you’ve forgotten—one of her greatest crimes in the eyes of the Miss Skippers was because she was seen at dinner-time going out with a bason covered with a cloth ; they said, you know, she ought to have waited till it grew dark, and yet Jacob told me that the poor girl she visited would have sunk after her illness, but for Mrs. Jones’s kitchen-physic.”

“ Jacob ! ”—but seeing a decidedly annoyed look on Lucy’s face at this second slighting mention of her husband, she went on:—“ Well, I was going to tell you something I’ve heard to-day. Last night, it must have been late, for it was quite dusk, as Jemima was sitting at the window——”

“ Looking after other people’s business instead of her own, as usual,” said Lucy, who detested gossip, and wished her mother would talk something else.

Now, Lucy, don’t be so ill-natured ; ever since you’ve been married, you’ve never a good word for my friend Jemima. I can’t think how it is, but single women and young brides seem as if they couldn’t abide each other. However, as I was saying, Jemima was sitting at the window ; Jemima sits at the window, she says, because since they’ve given up cards, they never light candles till it’s quite dark, and she has such an active mind, she can’t bear to sit dreaming and doing nothing but think as her sisters do. Well, there she was sitting last night, when she saw a tall young man—she’s quite sure he was a stranger—go and knock at Mrs. Jones’s door, and who should come down to open it but Mrs. Jones herself : it was getting so dusk she could not have told who it was, only luckily Mrs. Jones had a candle in her hand. The man darted in, in a quick, mysterious way, and, my dear, he stayed there a long while, and when he went away Mrs. Jones let him out at the door herself. It was very strange, wasn’t it ? Now, you know, of course, as Jemima says, he might be a brother or a relation of some kind, but those sort of things don’t look well : to say the least of it, they make people talk——My dear, what’s the matter ?”

Lucy had started up, her face scarlet with indignation.

“ Oh, mamma, mamma, this is too much. The Miss Skippers will get into trouble, if they don’t take care.”

Mrs. Wrenshaw looked confounded ; she was not so quick-witted as her daughter, but she was not dull, either.

“ The person,” went on Lucy, her lip quivering with the scorn she felt for Miss Jemima Skipper, “ who called on Mrs. Jones last night was Jacob ; her maid, Mary, had been suddenly seized with

epilepsy, and she got Carter, the chemist's boy, to run for Jacob. It was some time before he thought her well enough to be left, and then, dear kind fellow, he went and got old Mrs. Cooper, the charwoman, to sleep in the house, for, he said, although Mrs. Jones behaved admirably, he saw she was terribly frightened."

"Well, now, to be sure," said Mrs. Wrenshaw; "but, Lucy, my dear, you don't suppose *Jemima* would have said such a thing if she had not felt sure herself; you see, it was all from its being so dusk, but I'll go and tell her at once."

"Yes," said Lucy, "or she'll go telling some one else, and, dearest mother," she added, putting her arm round her neck and kissing her, "don't think I dislike *Jemima*; she's your friend, so how could I? I only wish she would try to believe, what I am sure is true, that we always see the worst half of good people; we don't know anything about the little conflicts and struggles that go on inside them. I wish *you* would call on Mrs. Jones, mamma; you'd do her good, and then if you were her friend, you could advise her about those little follies in dress and other things which annoy you."

Mrs. Wrenshaw made no promises, and she also offered no remonstrance; but Miss *Jemima* was utterly aghast at the warmth with which her friend espoused the pretty widow's cause, and also at the serious way in which she said that people ought to be sure beyond a doubt before they repeated anything against their neighbours.

"You see, my dear *Jemima*," said the comely dame; the excitement, and the flush it had brought, made her look quite handsome; "I'm a widow myself, so I've a fellow-feeling for 'em; maybe there'll be some scandal about me next."

Lucy wished to be alone, to greet Jacob on his return, so she had not pressed her mother to spend the rest of the day, as she usually did when her husband was going his long country round, and would not return till evening.

It was the longest day she had ever known.

What a remarkable change love—such love as Lucy's for her husband—effects in a woman's whole nature. She had no longer a separate existence; nothing interested or pleased sufficiently to arrest attention, unless shared with Jacob in the same way. No mere personal grief, or suffering, or disappointment, touched her as it did before her life was bound up in his; but anything, however trifling, that related to him, even her mother's depreciatory words that morning, grieved and wounded her. Her very liveli-

ness and amusing talk, one of her most distinguishing characteristics when with others, seemed almost to have deserted her now, except in her husband's presence. He was her soul—her inspiration, as she often told him. She felt stiff, and hard, and unlike herself when without him.

People say that men are often deceived in the women they marry; I do not believe this where there is true love. There is, as no one will deny who has ever felt it, a holy, purifying atmosphere in true Love, which elevates the character and aims of both man and woman; and if we look at marriage in its true light, as a sacrament, we may reasonably hope and believe that the deception, as it is falsely called—or rather the better reality—will continue, and that a faulty woman may be almost an angel in her husband's eyes, simply because she is enabled to be one to him, and no woman striving in the right way will be content or able to subdue her faults towards one person only; they must gradually lessen altogether.

It was six o'clock at last. Jacob always had his dinner on these long days at one of the large farms on the other side of Stedding, but Lucy knew he would be glad of his tea; how extra careful she was this evening that everything should be exactly as he liked it. There was no looking-glass in the study, and she had already been twice upstairs to see that her hair was in perfect order, and as Jacob liked, when she heard the welcome sound of wheels.

The way in which he met her kiss showed her he was no longer angry with her, but the maid was coming in and out, so she would wait awhile before she spoke. Jacob was so silent that it made her nervous; she began to think perhaps reconciliations were foolish things, that it would be better to say nothing, but slip quietly back into the old loving way they had together. Just as she was hesitating she looked up, and met her husband's eyes; they were so sorrowful that she was close to him in an instant.

"You are unhappy about something, darling; what is it?" she said, in her fond petting way.

"I've been unhappy all day," he said. "I was as sulky as a bear this morning, wasn't I, you old pet?"

And then of course, Lucy said she had been most to blame, and after they had settled that, she wondered whether they should ever disagree again, and to her great dismay Jacob said he thought they most probably should, but that, if he could help it, it should not last for more than a minute; he told her that she had been

perfectly right in the advice she had given him, at which Lucy felt glad and sorry too, for now she should see less of Jacob than ever, she feared ; and yet it must be right for a man to attend to his business.

CHAPTER V.

OUTWITTED.

FREDERIC HALLAM walked to Mr. Goldsmith's office in a very unusual state of mind ; he felt decidedly cross and irritable.

He had not taken the slightest notice to Hester of the sort of disagreement that had occurred between her and his mother ; it would only make things worse and do no good ; he would take very good care they should not meet often, and he should give Hester a caution before she went there to dinner.

But the evident repulsion between his mother and his wife had struck him forcibly, and again he wished that he had not been so hasty about his marriage.

He was not blind to his mother's faults or her silliness, but he loved her at present a great deal better than he loved Hester, and, although his pride and natural contradiction helped his kind-heartedness in taking his wife's part outwardly, he knew very well that if she and Mrs. Hallam came to open disagreement, his heart would be with his mother.

Frederic Hallam by nature was good-tempered ; of all things he hated what he called " domestic rows ; " the occasional disputes that arose between his mother and his aunt Martha always worried him, and to think that for the rest of his life he was doomed to continual bickering between his mother and his wife made him, for the time, as unhappy as his sanguine temperament could be.

He had not spoken one word to Hester till they reached Gloucester Place, and then, hastily getting out of the cab, he handed her into the house, and just saying he should be home to dinner, he turned away.

Before he reached Goldsmith's office he had persuaded himself that his forebodings were nonsense : women never agreed at first ; his mother was jealous now, but she would soon grow fond of Hester—that is to say, if Hester behaved herself. When he remembered her awkward abrupt refusal to go to the *fête*, he believed he had been wrong not to give her a good scolding at

once ; he could not have told himself why, but at this moment the remembrance of the strange likeness between Hester and her father suddenly seemed to rise before him : the square, well-defined jawbone and compressed lips—for during the visit in Wilton Place he had remarked how tightly she pressed her lips together—and he shivered involuntarily as he thought of his future life.

He remembered this foreboding afterwards.

Mr. Goldsmith was alone and apparently engaged in some profound calculations, but he rose at Hallam's entrance, and, extending both hands, shook his client's heartily, declaring himself, in his thick unctuous voice, delighted to see him.

"I hope my charming ward is quite well, eh?" and then, without any reason, he threw his head back so that his shirt-frill projected like the breast of a Pouter pigeon, and indulged in a long low laugh, which made Hallam in his present mood feel inclined to knock his head against the wall of his own office.

"Oh, yes ; she's quite well, thank you ; but I say, Goldsmith"—he laid his hat and gloves down on the table, for his head was aching with the unusual load of thought that had been pressing on it, and, besides, he contemplated a long visit—"why didn't you answer my note?"

"My dear friend"—the lawyer rubbed his white *soignées*-looking hands together, the brilliant on his little finger darting out rays of light in the process, as if it liked it—"I can give you two reasons for my silence : in the first place, I was away, and only returned yesterday ; and in the next I felt that I could explain myself better *vivâ voce*."

"Well, what is the explanation ? satisfactory, I hope," said Hallam, eagerly.

"My dear friend, what can I say to you ? I wish you'd take my advice."

"That's just what I came here for," said the young man, with a forced laugh, "only I want it gilded."

"Ha ! ha ! ha !" Mr. Goldsmith fell back in his chair for full enjoyment of his friend's joke. "No, really, Mr. Hallam, you grow too sharp for me. What does Mrs. Hallam junior say to these jokes?" Then seeing that Hallam was awaiting his answer with determined impatience, he crossed his legs, and putting his palms together, rested his hands on his knees, and grew serious. "The long and the short of it is, Mr. Hallam,

you'd better take my offer. Let me sink so much—you or your wife shall name the sum—in the purchase of this country place I spoke of. Take my word for it, you'll not only be able to manage with your present income, but you'll save money—positively save money—which I shall be able to turn to account for you, by-and-by."

"There's no use in talking of it, Goldsmith, I'm a Londoner to the back-bone, and you'll never find me burying myself in a country house, among pigs and poultry, where I should grow as slow and narrow-minded as people do who move perpetually in their own little circle."

Mr. Goldsmith was either in a mirthful humour, or he thought laughter the best way of parrying his client's demands, for he relapsed into another of his peculiar attacks, which Hallam bore with greater equanimity; he had had time to recover his coolness, and he well knew that without it he was no match for Goldsmith. Finding the lawyer did not speak, he went on.

"By the terms of Mr. Kirton's will, it appears to me that you could grant us any allowance you please, till my wife is one-and-twenty. It seems absurd and unreasonable that, in a couple of years' time, we should be suddenly put in possession of a large income, and now have the bare means of existence."

"Large income—bare means of existence! excellent! Pardon me, my dear friend! The truth is"—he went on, after having buried his face in his pocket-handkerchief—"that, even after your wife comes into possession of *her* fortune"—he laid a stress on the pronoun—"it is still actually under my control, for you have only to refer to my dear old friend's will to see that your wife is advised to consult me in all things; and moreover, my dear sir, when first I proposed your present income, you seemed quite satisfied with the sum I named, so that I feel surprised to hear you now term it 'a bare means of existence.' Remember, also, that your wife's money is absolutely settled on herself, when she comes of age."

Mr. Goldsmith was not laughing now, he was almost serious in his earnestness.

"Then you positively refuse to increase it. I want to give Mrs. Hallam a carriage and horses, and a good many other things; I see no way of doing so at present."

"But, my dear sir," said the lawyer, in his oiliest tones, "although, from conscientious scruples, I may refuse to set aside what I know to have been my lamented friend's wish in regard to

the amount of your income, I never said *I* should refuse to accommodate you with a small additional sum—from time to time."

Hallam hesitated; something Fortescue had said on the previous evening recurred to him forcibly.

"I had rather borrow money of Goldsmith as a poor man, than as a rich one. Don't have any more of that sort of thing."

"Literally, pay you for the use of my own money," he said, looking the other keenly in the face. "You're getting too sharp for me, Goldsmith."

"I beg your pardon," said Goldsmith, looking puzzled; "I thought we were talking of Mrs. Hallam's property just now."

"That's good! What's Hester's is mine, I take it; we're one now, thanks to your talent for match-making."

There was a petulance in the tone, spite of the young man's smiling face, which roused Goldsmith's curiosity.

"Yes," he said, rubbing his hands slowly together, while the serpent tongues of light seemed to Hallam, who was just estimating the probable worth of the gem, venomous in their sudden darting radiance, "that is one of the things on which I congratulate myself, although the amount of devotion you displayed, my dear friend, before your marriage, and the sudden growth of your love, showed me that there is no such thing really as match-making."

Hallam got up impatiently, and took a couple of turns up and down the office before he could answer; he would have recovered himself, and have been able to reply with his customary nonchalance, but the lawyer, for some reason or other, seemed determined to get at the truth, and he continued, in a soothing, deprecatory voice,—“Not that I doubt for a moment that, had my charming ward been introduced into society, she would have inspired universal admiration—created, in fact, a perfect furore.”

"I wish to Heaven you'd tried, then, before you forced me into marrying her."

"My dear friend! why, it was your own seeking. Bless me, bless me! is your memory so short? Have you forgotten that little memorandum which bound me, under a penalty, to keep my friend's daughter unmolested by admirers. How could I think anything else but that you were desperately in love?"

"You dare not persist in it, Goldsmith; I was wrong to marry as I did, perhaps. That only concerns myself now; but to you I made no pretence of wanting anything but Ralph Kirton's money."

The lawyer looked surprised, not at such a revelation—he knew what was coming long before—but that so thorough a man of the world as, for his age, he esteemed Hallam, should have committed himself so deeply. Perhaps, one sure way of detecting the mask so many of us wear, is the flush of surprise that peeps from beneath it at any ingenuous or seemingly uncalled-for avowal.

Hallam saw his mistake almost before the words and their full meaning had been comprehended by Goldsmith. He thought the lawyer's surprise that he did not truly love his wife unfeigned; and as he had conscience enough to feel that he ought to do so, it seemed like inflicting a double wrong on Hester, that any one else should know it. If there was one thing in the world from which he shrank with a feeling almost of terror, it was that she should ever learn that his first devotion to her had been feigned—how mercenary his motives had been (he did not know how truly this showed his appreciation of her character)—and now he had placed himself in the power of the man who stood in the nearest relation possible to her.

But his principle was never to act on impulse, unless some extraordinary circumstance made it justifiable, and he resolved to think over the matter before he put such a dangerous weapon against himself into the lawyer's hand, as he should do by asking him to hold his tongue. He began to feel that somehow Fortescue's warnings about him were not so unfounded as he had thought.

After a few more words relative to the loan he required, Goldsmith continuing to protest that money never had been so scarce—whereas, from what Hallam had heard, he believed that if he had taken him a few thousands to invest, he would have vowed that it never was so plentiful—he took his leave, feeling much less self-satisfied even than when he entered the office, except that he had the power of increasing his risks, for the sake of purchasing Hester's carriage and horses; at least this was what he told himself when he lounged into Tattersall's.

CHAPTER VI.

A WIFE'S DUTIES.

MISS MARTHA HALLAM had been terribly disconcerted when she learned that her beloved nephew had really married a ward of Mr. Goldsmith's—her Fred, who might have married any lady he chose to select ; and, besides the vexation of such a connection, there was a mystery and suddenness about the whole thing she did not like at all. Deeper still lay a secret misgiving she would scarcely confess to herself, much less to any one else, founded on the remembrance of a conversation one evening, between herself and her nephew on the subject of marriage. Had he—was it possible he had—married some girl only for her money ? With all her faults, Martha Hallam possessed one virtue worthy of note in the nineteenth century—she was not a money worshipper ; she did not estimate her friends only by the size of their houses, the luxury of their furniture, the number of their carriages and servants, or, and perhaps this is the lowest and meanest way we can value people, by the style and expense of their dress.

She had thought a good deal and sounded a loud flourish about her brother's marriage, and had liked her sister-in-law all the better for having a fortune ; but in her secret heart she had rather wished it had not been derived from trade ; she was not ashamed of her father and mother, but she wished the Hallams to rise in the scale of society, and she was keen-sighted enough to see that money is not all-powerful for that purpose ; and as to Fred, she considered that his mother's fortune, and her own, would be quite sufficient for him, till his manners and his talents raised him to some post of honour and distinction in his own country, or at one of the principal Courts of Europe. This was the career she desired for him, and his path to this would be much smoothed by marrying into a good old family ; “none of your new nobility.”

Martha Hallam had a way not uncommon among those who have lately risen, of designating these as upstarts ; she might probably have winced under the term *nouveaux riches*, but “she had never given herself airs, thank goodness, and could not be called either a mushroom or an upstart,” and so she would go on trying to break each end of the same stick. And now, if, after all her calculations and pretty web-weaving, Fred had married

some raw country girl, who could not trace a generation beyond her grandfather!

Martha Hallam was one of the wise people who pride themselves on being obstinate—they call it firm and consistent. She had determined not to have any acquaintance with the Miss Goldsmiths, and, therefore, she would not be present at her nephew's wedding. She was equally determined now that she would see and judge her new niece for herself before she heard Mrs. Hallam's opinion. They did not always agree about Fred; he was a Hallam, therefore he could not do wrong in his aunt's eyes; but then his mother was a Reed, and the Reeds were richer than the Hallams, therefore their ways must be "righter." Mrs. Hallam's father lived on his own property; in fact, he was the richest, most influential man in the neighbourhood. She had been accustomed to see his word law, and there being no real gentry localized there, she had never received any of the wholesome "snubbing" which, when administered in gentle doses, is, no doubt, very good for every one. She had met with it in London, but then she had attributed it to the ignorance of people who did not understand her true position, and very much to her husband's low birth and his want of self-assertion. Perhaps she was right there—humility is sadly at a discount among the virtues now-a-days. We live in an age of self-help. No man waits for another to blow his trumpet; and, instead of economizing our opinions, we are fond of riding them at full trot, however lame and shambling, over those of others, who may either not have the same amount of presumption, or who are not so readily full of words.

Miss Hallam and her sister were equally gifted in this respect; therefore they seldom differed openly; if they did, it nearly amounted to a quarrel, as neither would be the first to yield. But Mrs. Hallam had the compensating virtue of a cold temperament in a woman—a calm, peaceful temper; she was silly but not sensitive; and so they agreed on the whole better than might have been expected by any one who was only acquainted with the spinster's powers of irritation. The day after the unlucky visit in Wilton Place she arrived in Gloucester Place.

Hallam was not at home, but he had often talked of his aunt to Hester; moreover, she had sent her a set of ornaments on her marriage, pretty and becoming enough to propitiate any bride. Hester's reception was, therefore, much more cordial than it had been to her mother-in-law, who had called an hour previously and had taken Fred away with her.

The old lady expected to find Hester worthy her nephew's taste, yet she was surprised; she looked lovely as, with her cheeks tinged with the pink flush of excitement, her dark brown velvet-like eyes glistening through their fringe of black lashes, she sat quiet, nothing loth to listen while her new aunt descanted on Fred's perfections.

"I don't ask you if he makes a good husband, my dear; he couldn't do anything else, I'm sure; and I'm sure, too, you're a good and happy wife—you look like it. I'm so glad to have seen you, my dear." She bent forward and kissed Hester again; in her surprise at her beauty and grace, she had quite forgotten her dread of a *mésalliance*. "You must come very soon and spend a long day with me, and Fred shall come to tea and fetch you home, or I suppose he can manage an early dinner now, as he has given up office. I always dine early. You shouldn't sit with your back to an open window, my dear: you'll have a stiff neck if you do. And so you've lived in the country all your life—know nothing about London ways at all, I dare say. You must be very glad to get the chance of coming to London." Martha Hallam had a great contempt for country people.

"I might have come before. I've been asked to stay in London."

Martha thought this allusion, as she supposed to the Miss Goldsmiths, trying.

"Yes, yes; but one cannot judge much of a place when with mere acquaintances only; you will find London very different now."

"I think I should have enjoyed myself very much," said Hester, warmly, and determined to explain herself. "I should have been with uncle and aunt Wrenshaw, and they are my dearest friends."

Miss Hallam was rigid in an instant. What want of taste and tact in Hester to allude to her friends, who might be shopkeepers or something equally unmentionable! In her uncertainty of this, however, her duty was clear: she would not say anything that would annoy her new niece, but she must teach her by her manner, that henceforth her husband's family and friends must be her first consideration and all-sufficient.

"Oh, my dear, you mustn't have dearest friends now who don't belong to your husband," she said, laughing; "indeed, I always thought young wives were so devoted that they could see no merit in any one but their husbands."

"Nothing could ever make me give up uncle and aunt Wrenshaw," said Hester, so decidedly that the old lady started.

"A bad, brusque manner," she thought to herself; "her looks and her breeding don't agree."

Yesterday, perhaps, Hester would scarcely have said as much in her aunt's favour, for she had felt hurt and grieved by their long silence; but she had received a note that morning, which seemed to show that at any rate some of her letters to Mrs. Wrenshaw had miscarried: the note said that she might expect them any day, as they were most anxious to see her, having heard of her arrival in town from Lucy, and it breathed such warm affection that Hester's heart was longing to be once more with some of her own people. This would have been incomprehensible to Martha Hallam; she considered that, when a woman married, she became, body and soul, her husband's property; that thenceforth she ought to love his parents, his brothers, his sisters, relatives and friends, as well, if not better than her own, simply because they belonged to him, forgetting that nature is never to be coerced as far as the affections are concerned, and that it would augur ill for the strength of a woman's love and constancy to her husband, if she could in a few weeks or months uproot all the holy and tender associations of childhood and youth, and supply their place with new ones.

"I don't suppose, my dear, that Fred would ever *make* you do anything you really disliked," she said, gravely; "but when a woman loves her husband as she ought, it never comes to making—his slightest wish is law."

Hester felt annoyed, she scarcely knew why; but as she never bandied words by way of relieving her feelings, she decided that Miss Hallam was silly and prejudiced, although she was Fred's aunt, and remained silent.

"Have you had many callers yet; scarcely, though, I suppose?"

"Only one besides Mrs. Hallam; a very nice gentleman, Captain Fortescue, dined here the day before yesterday."

"Captain Fortescue! ah, yes, he is a nice person; a very first-rate man indeed. I expect you'll find Fred will be always with him, if he's in town."

"I hope not," said Hester, laughing; "I shan't like being left alone always."

"Oh, my dear, my dear, don't you make that mistake, the great mistake of young wives; never interfere with your husband's

enjoyments. Why, before my brother, Mr. Hallam, married, he and I were quite as attached as any husband and wife could be, I'm sure; but he used often to go out without me, and I never grumbled, and when he went into the country or to the Continent, he usually went alone; I never should have expected him, as a rule, to take me with him."

It seemed as if the conversation were full of stumbling-blocks. Hester tried to get on more open ground.

"Was my father-in-law your only brother, or had you any more?"

"There was one other sister, who died young; we never knew much about her. No, my brother and I were all in all to each other; I don't suppose any brother and sister ever loved each other as we did; it is always so in small families; quite impossible in a large family, where there are so many to love, that there should be the same depth of feeling; it is more on the surface there, more frittered away."

"And yet," said Hester, thoughtfully, "I have heard it said that large families are usually the most united in affection of any, because they are generally so much less selfish."

Captain Fortescue and her husband had had an argument on this subject, and Hester had listened eagerly, and, almost unconsciously, had adopted the Captain's views as her own.

Miss Hallam began rapidly to protest against such a notion, but the arrival of visitors finished the discussion; the door was thrown open, and, to Hester's joy, Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw entered.

In her delight at seeing them, she forgot all about her new aunt; but as soon as the first inquiries had been made and answered, she saw Mr. Wrenshaw glancing towards the stranger, and she introduced them to each other. She blushed and felt very nervous; it was the first time she had been called on to perform such a task; but she had watched Fred carefully, and knew it ought to be done, in a case like the present.

Miss Hallam evidently considered it unnecessary; indeed, a grievous mistake; for she gave the most frigid and rigid of bows, completely frustrating Mr. Wrenshaw's attempt to shake hands, by keeping her own stiffly in the folds of her dress.

Spite of this rebuff, the cheerful, happy-tempered old gentleman, always slow to take offence, tried to enter into conversation with her, while Hester and his wife were talking, but he found it impossible to get anything but monosyllables in reply to his observa-

tions. Martha Hallam had far too much self-respect ever to talk to people she knew nothing about, and who might possibly be butchers and bakers—universal courtesy and she were strangers.

With all his good temper and tact, Mr. Wrenshaw had a keen insight into human nature; he soon guessed the secret of the lady's rudeness, and, turning his back upon her, left her to her meditations, earnestly wishing she would go, as of course there were a great many questions he wished to ask Hester, which her new aunt's presence prevented. But he did not quite understand Martha Hallam; she did not mind any patience or trouble so long as she accomplished her object, and she considered she had a greater right in her nephew's house than his wife's relations had; in fact, she scarcely saw what business they had there; she was quite sure Fred had not asked them, and, as has been before said, whatever Martha Hallam felt sure of, must be right. It was quite enough that her nephew should have married this country girl, should have given her the honour and glory of the name of Hallam, without being surrounded by a set of ill-bred relations, as she was certain they were. So she sat stiff, and straight, and silent, till Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw fancied she must be spending the day, and that there was no use in remaining longer with the hope of any private talk. Miss Hallam scarcely acknowledged their farewell bows, and Hester followed them out into the hall to have a few last words; but there sat a man awaiting Mr. Hallam's return, so she could only speak still in the same reserved manner, and Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw went away with heavy hearts, for they feared their niece was not happy—at any rate, she did not seem quite her own mistress.

Martha Hallam said nothing to Hester about her visitors, and, although perhaps in some ways this was a relief, it galled her that they should be ignored altogether.

She talked much about refined reading and elegant pursuits, and seemed to take for granted that Hester must depend entirely for companionship in her husband's absence on herself and Mrs. Hallam. But she became affectionate on this topic, and, kissing Hester, again assured her that it should not be her fault if she were lonely.

When her new aunt left, Hester could scarcely tell whether she liked or disliked her; she thought she meant to be kind, but she certainly had not formed a very high opinion of her good sense or courtesy.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHADOW DEEPENS.

HESTER was growing daily more like her hard and reserved old self. Her love for her husband at first seemed to have changed her whole nature, for she worshipped him almost slavishly; in her heart she did so still; but he spent so little of his time with her now, that she had scant opportunity of showing her devotion. It seemed strange to her that when she had worked so hard to fit herself to be his companion, he should avoid her society more and more. Except for this she had no positive cause of complaint against him. He was generally kind, and cheerful, and courteous. Warmly affectionate he had never been, so that she did not miss. But a secret unsatisfied longing for something more confiding, more united in their mutual relation, was felt, although not acknowledged, by her.

She had never indulged in the romance self-created in an imaginative mind, without books or outward helps, and from her deeply felt inferiority, she possibly would have acknowledged that she must love her husband better than he could be expected to love her. Still she thought husbands and wives should be one, and it puzzled her to understand, as time went on, how, if Fred loved her at all, he could be happy to stay away so much from her, when no actual employment forced him to do so, while she sat counting the hours till his return—far more dull and listless than those of her old life—for now it seemed as if she were so bound up in him that she could not enjoy life alone.

So she would pass her time; and then, when he came in, fresh and bright, sometimes with a present he had brought as a surprise, always in such cheerful spirits that she soon found herself laughing heartily, and feeling a child again beside him, instead of the premature woman she had been all the morning—then she would take herself seriously to task for her discontent and ingratitude, and give up for the time all her half-formed resolutions of appealing to him about his indifference, and, as it seemed, changed affection. Half-formed resolutions in a character like Hester's may be cast aside or forgotten, or rather, smothered out of sight for the time; but it is for the time only; they are never formed hastily, like those of an impulsive nature, and therefore they have, from being suppressed and kept back, struck deep root,

and will, in spite of many checks and interruptions, grow up sturdy plants at last.

She had few visitors. She had lunched with Miss Hallam, and dined with her mother-in-law; but Fred had, to her keen disappointment, engaged himself elsewhere. He often dined out now, and poor Hester had found Mrs. Hallam's society more irksome than anything she had yet met with. Shy as she was, she was not really timid; but it seemed to her that at Wilton Place she was in a microscope, and she felt more awkward than she had ever been in her life. If she rose to walk across the room, it was impossible to do it easily with those cold placid blue eyes watching every movement, to see how it was executed. In all that concerned physical skill, Mrs. Hallam senior, from practice and association, had the advantage; but when she tried to draw from her daughter-in-law, without seeming to ask direct questions, some particulars of her early life, Hester was more than a match for her. Her own pride and reserve in speaking of herself came to the aid of Hallam's warning, never to talk of the farm, or of her life there; and when she said Good-night, she left her mother-in-law puzzled to decide whether she were the dull obtuse person her answers would have pronounced her, or, as she felt more inclined to believe, a very artful, determined young woman.

Thenceforth Mrs. Hallam considered she had been repulsed and aggrieved by her new daughter, and treated her in a kind of ill-used manner. She did not venture to complain openly to her son; he had so sternly rebuked her first attempts at finding fault with Hester, that she dared not repeat them at present. Besides, she was displeased with him; he seldom came near her now, and he ought to have broken through any engagement to dine with her, when she had given him a formal invitation. It was very bad taste to say the least of it: "Poor fellow!" sighed his mother, "it is the sad effect of unrefined association, for I feel certain that girl is low-born."

Hester now disliked her mother-in-law with all the strength of her nature; there was a slight jealousy, too, mingled with it; she saw how fully his mother possessed the attributes her husband was most solicitous for in her—she was thoroughly graceful and elegant. Hester looked so in repose, but she was conscious of being still awkward in her movements. Then Mrs. Hallam was an accomplished musician, and here there was perfect sympathy between mother and son; and last, not least, although Mrs. Hallam was not by any means talented, she had a pretty way of talking, a

light easy manner of saying frivolous nothings, far more likely to please most men than the most sensible conversation.

Hester found her new aunt more tolerable, although Martha Hallam was always ready to depreciate everybody and anything not essentially hers, or belonging to her family. Still she had a warm heart underneath this fault-finding, and, after all, she could not help being fond of and taking an interest in Fred's wife. So she had striven to make her niece's visit pleasant, and had thus soothed, although she had not obliterated, Hester's resentful remembrance of her conduct to the Wrenshaws.

At one time she had thought of complaining of this to her husband, but she loved him too well to vex him willingly, and it would certainly grieve him to hear of her aunt's rudeness.

She contented herself with mentioning that her aunt and uncle had called, and asking him when he could take her to see them.

He looked grave and told her there was no hurry. He had never seen them, and imagined Hester's uncle and aunt as unrepresentable as her father had seemed to him; besides, he had determined, till she was of age, and the management of her money satisfactorily settled, she should not have any adviser but himself.

Hester rebelled secretly; but Fred did not say it unkindly; he even kissed her and asked her if she were tired of him that she was so anxious to be running after her relations, and an unsolicited kiss from Fred made the day a white one in Hester's memory. Lucy would have triumphed to see how thankful her proud, undemonstrative cousin was for the slightest fondness.

She sat now listening eagerly. The dinner-hour was near, and he had not returned home. She started up as she heard him come in, and ran out into the hall to meet him, but he turned away.

She went up to him with a happy smile, and clasped his arm with both her hands.

"Oh, Fred, dearest, I thought you were never coming. How late you are!"

He drew his arm away abruptly, and muttered he wished she would not make such an exhibition of him, and then went up to his dressing-room.

Hester followed, for she thought he was ill. So he was in mind. He had been trying for two days to see Goldsmith, and had been denied admittance in such a manner that he was convinced it was intentional, and as he returned home, thoroughly

out of temper at what he called the "Jew's insolence," he met a friend who confided to him that it had oozed out some trickery was contemplated towards the horse on which he had betted very largely. He had never felt so thoroughly entangled and outwitted in his life : he began to believe that Goldsmith was a shuffling old scoundrel, and then, when he reached home and wanted to be quiet, it was too much that Hester should forget all self-respect and rush out like a school-girl, and make love to him before the servant.

Frederic Hallam was not often seriously out of temper, but, when he was, he closely resembled his mother : he became fastidious, cold, and unkind to every one ; the only way was to leave him to himself ; but poor Hester had not learned this way of managing him.

She followed him silently upstairs into their bedroom, out of which his room opened.

"For patience sake, Hester, do leave me alone. I have scarcely time to dress before Fortescue comes, without your coming to worry me."

She had seen him in this sort of temper before, but then she felt that she had given him cause for vexation. Now she was blameless, and, spite of her love, Pride rose against what she considered injustice, and in an instant her manner changed. It may be all very well for a woman to assert dignity, but it is hardly a quality likely to conduce to domestic happiness. Hallam thought she had never seemed so hard and unloveable as now. She drew herself up to her full height, and saying, "Very well, then, if you don't want me, I'll go downstairs," quitted the room.

Outside the door, she met her maid, who told her Captain Fortescue was in the drawing-room.

Hester swept past her, for she knew her face could not be natural-looking, and the prying semi-impertinence of this woman was one of her great annoyances. She had never complained of her to her husband—her nature was too proud for complaint ; besides, he had found Parkins for her, and it seemed ungracious to complain of his gifts ; but she had quite resolved that as soon as this country place was purchased, about which Mr. Goldsmith had spoken to her the only time she had seen him since her arrival in town, she should discharge Parkins and have Faith Stasson in her place. Faith would soon learn to be handy, and she hated to be waited on as much as Parkins considered necessary. In many ways, it often seemed to Hester that her maid was the

greatest lady of the two ; by herself, she would never have dreamed of half the requirements Parkins considered indispensable. She was sure it would be economy to get rid of her, and, besides this, she had the uneasy feeling that this woman had seen her from the first, knew all her awkwardness and all her mistakes ; it would be very unpleasant to have her as a perpetual reminder when she took the head of her own establishment, for it had been tacitly agreed between her and her husband that they were not to have a home of their own till she had grown more used to the world's ways.

After all, Hester wronged the woman ; she pitied her mistress far more than she thought slightly of her, although she might consider her a trifle too industrious for a lady born ; but she confided to Hallam's man-servant that she thought his master a very careless husband, and one who deserved that things should go wrong.

Hester paused a moment before she entered the drawing-room ; she had always had a slight contempt for what she called Lucy's wheedling, coaxing ways, and yet instinct told her that if she were not too proud, too awkward for it, an affectionate petting manner was more wifely than cold haughtiness ; still, sorry as she was for their disagreement, she felt that it would be a tacit falsehood to be the first to make friends ; it would be owning herself in the wrong.

Captain Fortescue soon set her at her ease, and before her husband appeared had drawn her into an animated account of her visit to the opera a few nights before.

"I was so very sorry not to be able to go with you ; Hallam should have let me know sooner ; and you really were pleased ?"

"Yes, very much ; only I should enjoy it more if the words were English : I am not forward enough yet in Italian to follow the meaning."

"But you can admire the music without caring about the sense of the words, can you not ?" he said, smiling.

"I am afraid you will think me very literal, but I can't," she said, blushing ; she was not stiff and hard to Captain Fortescue ; he was so entirely courteous to her, that she never felt shy with him.

Hallam now came in ; his friend saw how cloudy he looked, but he had just met the same kind friend who had poisoned Fred's hopes of success at the races, so he wisely kept the conversation from sporting matters.

"My sister-in-law wants to know when she may call on

Mrs. Hallam," Fortescue said, during dinner, looking at his friend as he spoke.

"Oh! does she? Tell her she'd better wait till we're in a house of our own. We don't intend to visit while we're here, you know; at least, my wife doesn't; or, stay, I'll call on Lady Helena myself and explain."

"Is that the beautiful Lady Helena Fortescue Mrs. Hallam told me of?" said Hester.

"Some people admire her greatly," said Captain Fortescue, smiling, "but I am not one of the number."

"By Jove, Fortescue! I can't think what you mean; I saw her in the park yesterday, and she looked handsomer then ever; besides, it's not mere beauty in her case—she looks so thoroughbred."

He had spoken pettishly, and partly to get rid of some of his angry feelings towards Hester, and yet the moment the words were uttered he felt they were ungenerous.

His wife turned very pale and pressed her lips tightly together; and she did not join in the conversation until it had turned on other topics.

Frederic Hallam must have been in a very irritable state, for he frowned at some trifling *gaucherie* of Hester's during dinner. He was still thinking of the difference between her and Lady Helena, and how impossible it would be to introduce Hester in that kind of society.

As soon as she left the table he asked his friend to go with him to the theatre.

"Your sister said she had a box at Drury Lane to-night and asked me to look in."

"What, with Mrs. Hallam? that will be an excellent way of introducing her to Helena."

"Oh, no; I don't think Hester would like that sort of thing; she is sadly shy, as you may see; she would rather go to the theatre quietly with me another evening; besides, I'm not going to tie myself to take my wife everywhere, I can tell you: you won't do it when you marry, Fortescue."

"As I have no intention of marrying, we won't argue that question; but it isn't fair to leave Mrs. Hallam to spend her evening alone."

"Oh, my dear fellow, she doesn't mind; she's used to it; or, well," he said, as some slight compunction for his late neglect and unkindness to her again made itself felt, "why don't you

stay and make yourself agreeable? I shan't be away long, only, when I've pledged my word to a lady, I like to keep it."

Fortescue was annoyed. He knew Lady Helena's determination to be worshipped; although strong in her severe virtue, or, more truly (for she had little shielding love for her husband), safe in her coldness, she only bestowed an occasional smile in return.

He often thought, if he were Gerald, he would not allow so many dangles round his wife. He was angry with Hallam for persisting in his admiration now that he was married, and to such a wife, thought Fortescue, as he looked at Hester, "as superior to Helena, in all except style, which she will soon acquire, as a diamond is to tinsel."

Hallam did not go with his friend to the drawing-room, and his wife's manner puzzled Fortescue, for she seemed rather pleased to hear that her husband had gone out, than disappointed that he had left her.

In reality, she was so tired of lonely evenings that it was a relief he had chosen this one when she had a companion, as it gave her some hope that the next might be spent at home, and she was unwilling that Fortescue should notice Fred's unkind manner. Probably going out (Fortescue had not said where he was gone) would make him quite himself again; his anger never lasted long.

She was surprised to find how pleasantly the evening passed without him.

For the first time in her life, she was enjoying the conversation of a well-read, highly-educated man, too nobly gifted himself not to appreciate and take delight in drawing out her powers of reflection and observation, and sufficiently *blasé* with society to enjoy keenly the freshness of her remarks.

He made her talk of much that she had seen in Italy and Switzerland, and from him she gathered with eager interest many bits of information concerning the history and antiquities of many of the remarkable cities she had visited.

"But Hallam surely told you these things?"

"My husband hardly ever had time to go anywhere with me;" then noticing his look of surprise, she checked herself and added, "you know, if I had not been so ignorant, I ought to have heard some of these things from the guides; but I had never learned Italian till after my marriage."

She looked up at him as if she expected he would be astonished

at her ignorance, but he was completely fascinated. He felt sure she possessed latent, though uncultivated, mental power, while she was so simple still, so thoroughly unaffected in all she said and did. He longed to know more of her and her past history, and he thought that in the frank, confiding mood she was in, she would readily have satisfied his curiosity; but Hallam had so clearly shrunk from the subject that Fortescue felt he had no right to cross-question Hester about what her husband probably wished unknown.

Hallam did not return till his friend was leaving. He was more cheerful, but his manner to his wife seemed as cold as it had been at dinner-time.

Fortescue walked slowly home. He wondered how long Hester's devotion to her husband would stand such a strain upon it. She had avoided rather than sought the mention of his name; but her eyes, when she looked at him, and a sort of undefinable manner when in his presence, convinced Fortescue that she worshipped him. "Strange creatures women are—strange unaccountable creatures!"

He shrugged his shoulders; somehow or other his friend had sunk in his esteem lately, since he had seen him with his wife.

"I always liked Fred for his social companionable qualities rather than because any great sympathy existed between us. He is one of those men one's heart opens to of its own accord, so thoroughly good-tempered and bright, but that's not the sort of thing to take women, at any rate such a creature as that. I'm fairly puzzled to imagine how she has managed to make him into an idol; it must be a simple case of infatuation, and, unluckily, quite one-sided, I'm afraid. Master Fred shows very bad taste: that girl has only half developed mentally; in fact, she's only beginning to do so; she'll no more be able to make a companion of him than she'll fly, and I'm afraid her love won't stand the revelation of her idol's inferiority, if she gets no love or devotion in return."

And he congratulated himself that he had never married, and wondered whether the infatuation of love was strong enough to blind women lastingly to their husbands' failings, and came to the conclusion that the only chance for this would be in a case where the love was equal on both sides; therefore he again shrugged his shoulders, and thought Fred had better mind what he was about.

CHAPTER VIII.

HESTER SPEAKS.

HESTER had the forbearance to wait till next morning, before she spoke to her husband. After she left the dinner-table on the previous evening, she thought over all that had passed, and made up her mind that she must in some way have offended him, and that it would be better to ask what it was about. An indistinct feeling of discontent and unhappiness, a glimpse of the cloud of coming evil, weighed on her spirits. He had certainly stayed at home much more in Italy than he did now. Was it—and an uncomfortable thought traversed her brain, she was not fertile in inventing troubles, although she liked to ponder over them—was it that, now he was near his own friends again—fine fashionable people like Lady Helena Fortescue—he saw the difference between them and herself? Poor Hester! this was a cruel thought, but Fortescue came upstairs so soon that she had not had time to consider it fully.

Hallam appeared at breakfast earlier than usual, so it seemed a good opportunity.

She did not go up to him, or use any little fondling way of softening her appeal; if she had vexed him, it had been unwillingly, and she felt he had made no atonement for his unkindness.

“Fred, why were you so angry with me yesterday?”

A shadow of some kind must have come across the reverence of her love, for she did not feel timid, or as if she were afraid of offending him.

“Angry was I?” he scarcely raised his eyes from his newspaper. The silence that followed seemed to attract his attention; he looked up, and Hester’s pale face and determined expression aroused him to the full consciousness that something unusual was happening.

“Eh! what! angry!” he repeated, as if awakening from sleep. “Yes, I remember I was cross because I wanted my dinner, and I’d been bored about business. You mustn’t mind about such trifles, my dear girl, really you mustn’t,” he added seriously, for the expression of her face annoyed him, she seemed to be taking such a very high hand in the matter. “I’m a good-tempered fellow, and so you’ve not got used to it; but you should see what some women have to take quietly. I dare say it is not

the last time you'll find me cross before dinner ; only take a word of advice, Hester, as you've recurred to disagreeables yourself—always leave me alone at such times, I hate to be bothered when I'm cross."

The servant came in with the letters ; so Hester had time to think over her reply. This way of answering her appeal had quite disconcerted her view of her wrongs. He seemed to think he had a right to be cross, and that she was fortunate that he was not so often.

He might be right. Hester felt how ignorant she was of the behaviour of married people, but this was the slightest part of her complaint. What she wanted explained was, why, when he seemed so frank and open to every one, was he so reserved towards her : and why did he seem to care so little—or, more truly, not at all—for her confidence ? Captain Fortescue had made her feel that she could entertain her husband, if he would only stay at home sometimes, and talk to her in the same way. He could teach her so much that she now spent hours in diving into books for ; her thirst for knowledge had become insatiable lately ; but then if he did stay at home, he always went on the sofa after dinner, and slept a great part of the evening.

There were several letters for him this morning, and only one for her, and she sat thinking before she looked to see who it was from. But before he had finished reading the last and most important looking of his letters, an exclamation of pleasure from Hester made him look up.

" Who's your letter from ? "

" From Lucy ; and, Fred, she wants us to go down and stay a few days with them next week ; will it not be delightful ? "

" Very delightful, no doubt. But, my dear child, your cousin Lucy must live sadly out of the world, not to know that next week is Tatton races, and to expect Londoners to bury themselves in the country just as the season has begun in earnest sounds like a joke."

The smile vanished from Hester's face.

" But, Fred, you did not say so when her last letter came, saying she was going to ask us soon ; you said I might write and thank her, so I think we are pledged to go."

" You may think what you like," said her husband, " but I'm not going to give up Tatton for any country cousins whatever ; but I tell you what, Hester, if you like you may go down to Stedding ; you can take Parkins, you know."

Hester's self-will had not often been called into action since her marriage, but it was fully roused now. It seemed to her that she had been led into giving a tacit promise to accept Lucy's invitation, and that now she must break her word.

"But, Fred, we could put it off till the week after the races; shall you not be able to go then?"

"Certainly not; so don't worry any more. You had better write to-day and say you will go to them next Monday; the change will do you good."

He turned to leave the room.

"Don't go, I want to speak to you, Fred." Her cheeks were flushed, and she spoke in her harsh sententious way. "It seems very strange that you should send me away from you, so soon after we are married. I don't understand it; you won't let me go to aunt Wrenshaw here in London, who would love me, and make me happy, and yet you seem glad to send me away altogether." Her eyes filled with tears, but her pride kept them back.

"Good heavens!" Hallam looked thoroughly annoyed now. "What on earth do you mean? Why, I myself heard Goldsmith tell you, that the last alteration your father made in his will was to desire that you were not placed under the care of your uncle Wrenshaw. He had some good reason for this, you may be certain, and I have considered it my duty to keep you apart."

"My father did not forbid all intercourse between us," she said, slowly and distinctly; "but what I should like to know is if you really want to get rid of me, because, unless you do, I had rather not go to Stedding without you."

If Hallam had told the truth, he would have said, yes. Her manner was so haughty—so unlike anything he had ever seen in her before—that he shuddered, and felt a positive dread and dislike of his future life with her. He believed when once women took to lecturing their husbands, they never lost an opportunity of exercising the talent.

"What a fuss you are making about nothing. What on earth do you mean by such folly? Really, Hester, you ought to know better. Do husbands and wives never pay country visits alone, do you think?"

"I don't know, but I have been wanting to tell you for some time, that I am not happy; not as happy as I think you would like me to be. I see little enough of you, and now you seem to wish to send me away altogether."

Hallam by a strong effort repressed his impatience, and the

angry words that were in his mind to speak : Hester's manner had something serious and impressive in it, that mastered him in spite of himself. He walked to the window and frowned at the opposite houses.

After a minute or two he turned round.

"How can you be so silly," he said, in a calmer tone; "I never said you were to go to Stedding unless you liked; only I must be away two or three days next week, and I thought you would not like being alone."

"But I could go with you."

Hallam was confounded. What change had come over his quiet wife, she seemed to be inclined to manage him completely.

"No, Hester; you must allow me to be the best judge of the society into which I take you. I am going to Tatton races, if you must know, with a party of gentlemen, and I don't think all of them fit associates for my wife; but if you like," he added, as a new idea occurred to him, "you can stay with my mother while I'm away; I know she would take good care of you."

"No, thank you," she said, proudly, for she keenly felt how he had evaded her question; "I don't mind about being alone, Fred; I ought to be pretty well used to that, I think; at any rate, I would rather be quite alone than with any one who despises me as your mother does."

"Hester, you are possessed this morning, I believe—if you have kept your own counsel, what on earth can my mother or any one else find to despise in you?"

The words were well chosen, and they soothed her for the moment, but he said them as coldly as if he were speaking to some indifferent person.

"I did not say she had any right to behave as she does; but she thinks I am beneath her, and I hate people who do so; and it is so false to pretend to kiss me and treat me like a daughter, and then to wound me by ill-natured words."

"Stop, stop, Hester! don't go so fast; you must not take up an unfounded prejudice against my mother; you don't understand each other yet, and you've seen so little of each other, I don't wonder."

She went on as if he had not spoken.

"I will not see your mother alone any more, Fred, till she treats me differently; and as to your aunt—I did not mean to tell you, but it seems as if I had better, or you will say I have taken up a prejudice against her too—she has not been unkind to me, but she almost insulted uncle and aunt Wrenshaw, the day they

came here. They mayn't be her friends, but they are mine, and I love them, and I should think you would wish your wife's friends treated with respect; at least I thought husband and wife were one and the same, but your relations don't seem to think so."

However aggrieved he might be by her way of speaking, the truth of the last sentence was indisputable; his mother's manner had greatly annoyed him, and he could quite believe it was worse when he was out of the room; however, he felt he must say a word for his aunt.

"You are unreasonable, Hester; people never take to their relations by marriage at once; aunt Martha is silly and eccentric—almost all old maids are, unless they are very humble-minded—but she's a kind-hearted creature, and she told me herself she was very fond of you, and if you would just humour her and let her patronize you a little, you would get on famously. But now look here, I don't like disturbances; I shan't be home till dinner-time, and I'm going out directly after on business. I give you my word, it is on business, Hester. I tell you this, that we mayn't have another fuss. I am sure you'd take things quietly, if you knew how very unpleasant it is to me to be spoken to as you have spoken this morning; so shake hands, and make up your mind it's all fancy and nonsense about my wanting to get rid of you. I'm off now," and with an unusual kiss, he left the room.

Hallam wondered to himself how it was that he had not given his wife what he would have called "a good blowing up." The longer he reflected upon their morning's conversation, the greater became his surprise. That she, an ignorant country girl of nineteen, a mere child in every way, should dare to lecture and set herself in opposition to him, when he had done her the unspeakable service of marrying her, and making her more of a lady than she could have possibly been without his help, utterly overwhelmed him.

He had noticed a change in her manner lately; she had grown quieter, harder, and more abrupt; but she had not been very well, and he thought perhaps she wanted a little change of air. Still it was most unreasonable. He had hired a carriage for her, so that she could drive out every day if she liked; he had taken her to the opera, given her some new bracelets and a necklace: what more could she wish for?

"I believe it's a struggle for power," he said to himself; "I don't blame her for trying, women always do it; but if a man throws himself away on a country girl, the least he expects is to be

master in his own house ; perhaps it would be wiser to let her see a little more society ; she'd soon find out that husbands are not expected to be tied to their wives' apron-strings from morning till night. It's odd ; she is the last girl I should have expected any temper from ; however, I should think after what I said she'll be careful ; still it's unpleasant to feel she has a temper ; however, she is so fond of me that for her own sake she'll keep it in check."

Still he felt dissatisfied with the way he had behaved ; it seemed to him that he ought to have been more angry, and it was equally unpleasant to be conscious of the revolution that had taken place in his ideas about her. Do as he would, he could no longer regard her as the half-formed, inferior creature he had married only a few months ago.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRUTH.

HESTER had surprised herself quite as much as her husband ; she did not understand nor could she control the sudden "Berserker"-like anger that had prompted her to speak as she had done ; she had been subject to it as a child, then for a time it had passed away, but, as we have seen, it had once returned in her home-life after she had first seen Hallam. She did not regret anything she had said to him, only she wished it had been said differently. Why was it ? what could it be ? She felt sure that with Mrs. Hallam, whom she disliked, she could never be tempted to anger—she should always have power to control herself. It was strange that only with her father and with her husband, the two beings she had loved best, she should have given way to it. Poor Hester ! she did not remember the effort it had cost her to speak on each occasion. It is a hard task to root up a stately pine-tree, but when once that is accomplished, 'ware the fall ; it thunders down the side of the mountain, not to be arrested by any intervening obstacle.

She had told Fred now all that was on her mind—she hoped he was not offended past forgiveness—but no, he had shaken hands and kissed her at parting ; she would try and remember his advice ; she thought if he loved her there would be little trouble in following it, and now that she had said she disliked being left alone he would, no doubt, make more of a companion

of her. If he loved her—as yet she did not really believe in his want of love, although misgivings, shadowy forerunners of the truth, would trouble her; she resolved to try and be as gentle as possible to atone for her angry words; after what he had said, it would be better not to take any notice of their quarrel, but look cheerful and contented.

She kept her resolution, and Hallam was surprised and pleased, and when he went out, came back again to say he should be home early.

He was glad she had the sense to avoid a scene or an explanation; he really did not mean to tie himself to stay at home any more than before; but he thought he should humour her for a few days, especially as he intended to stay away the whole of the race week.

He was, therefore, glad, on the whole, that the dispute had happened. Hester's spirits were certainly more cheerful, during the next few days, and one evening that he spent at home, when Captain Fortescue was there, instead of going to sleep, he exerted himself sufficiently to take his full share in the conversation. And Fortescue decided that what had taken place before was exceptional.

Hester was happy again; it was plain to her that if her husband saw more of her, the confidence she so much desired would soon be established between them, and from what he had said, she felt sure that even if they did not settle in the country this year, they should go away together in the autumn, to some place apart from these fashionable friends, for whom she felt an equal dislike and awe.

On Monday morning, the day preceding that on which Hallam intended to go to Tatton, he left home as usual soon after breakfast. Hester was standing at the dining-room window, studying the weather; for Captain Fortescue, on the previous evening, had been extolling the beauties of Surrey, and she was meditating a long drive. She had a keen appreciation of landscape beauties, although, from her want of artistic taste, she had little eye for the picturesque, either in form or colour, or for minor natural beauties, such as wild flowers or plants; distant views and fine trees she could admire, but she had always thought Lucy trifling and foolish, for peering into hedges and ditches, when they were walking together, or raving about the wild grace of a common bramble bush.

Suddenly her husband passed the window, and came up the steps; between surprise and joy, Hester lost all presence of mind;

she had been looking forward to hours of solitude ; it seemed as if the sun had suddenly burst from behind the bank of clouds she had been studying. Without pausing to reflect, she had darted out into the hall, and opened the door before he could knock.

At the same moment Parkins appeared on the staircase.

Hallam did not speak, but his look of intense annoyance recalled Hester to herself, and Parkins' alarmed expression as she hurried forwards to close the door again, confirmed her in the conviction that she had committed some grievous crime against the proprieties of life.

Her husband did not speak till he had closed the dining-room door upon them both, and then he turned to her with a look of his mother in his face that made her almost shudder.

"Hester, I must beg you to remember that you have servants of your own, and that there are plenty belonging to this house ; if you do not care for the opinion of any stranger who might have been passing, at least recollect my feelings, and do not disgrace yourself in this manner again. Good heavens ! suppose my mother had seen you ! "

"I will not do it again," said she, gently, for she was vexed that Parkins had been a witness of her mistake. "I was so pleased to see you, Fred, I forgot all else."

"Well, never mind, only don't do it again. Just give me my new cardcase, will you, and see that it has cards in it. I took out this empty one this morning ; that's a little thing you might see to, Hester."

She flew to fetch his cardcase. He had the love of being waited on peculiar to some men, rarely to those of a very unselfish tender nature—I mean where their wives are concerned. Hester was willing enough to do what he wished, unbidden ; but then her ignorance of society and its ways made her, of course, unable to anticipate all his requirements.

The cardcase was soon found, and he was gone, but the little incident had left a very unequal impression on his wife's mind to that which it had produced on his own.

She thought it was a pity she had been so hasty in acting, without staying to think first ; but she had told Fred she was sorry, and there was an end of it ; and, after all, there could be no real harm in opening the door to her husband because she was glad to see him home again ; if there were, the rebuke was greater than the fault.

But Hallam was seriously annoyed.

Hester had always seemed so calm, so self-possessed, so free from any girlish folly or romance, that he had never imagined, with all her shortcomings, she could make him ridiculous. He could not bear to be laughed at, and, with the usual inconsistency of a man who makes a *mésalliance*, he considered any infringement of the conventions of society a heinous offence against good-breeding.

His ruffled mood increased when he found admittance again refused him at Mr. Goldsmith's office; however, this time it seemed that the lawyer really was out of town, for his head clerk vouchsafed the intelligence that he had gone down to Stedding, to look after some property in that neighbourhood.

Hallam immediately guessed he had gone to look after the farm, which, for the present, had been put under Peter Stasson's care, at Hester's express request. He knew very well that her great wish was to have the farmhouse put in thorough repair, and furnished for a future home for them; but to this he was decidedly opposed, although, with his usual easy way of managing matters, he had not contradicted her when she suggested the idea. But now he was angry and thwarted, for it was almost indispensable that he should see Goldsmith again before he left town. He wondered what he was doing at Kirton's Farm: it was only a short time ago that he had told him he was just returned thence—surely he could not be planning such an absurdity as their residence there. He chafed like an untamed horse at the subjection in which the lawyer seemed resolved to hold him till Hester came of age. It was unendurable to be no longer a free man in any way, to be tied to a wife for whom he did not feel strong liking (Frederic Hallam had never thought about the possibility of being in love with any woman yet), and whom he was now becoming ashamed of; if this sort of thing was to go on till she came of age, he knew he should dislike her. His idea in marrying a fortune had been that there would be plenty of means to render them independent of each other; a large house to begin with, so that if their tempers did not suit, they need not often meet; then would come the infinitude of distractions and pleasurable occupation which riches always entail. He had never intended to lose any of the freedom of his life by marriage; but he had taken a one-sided view of the question. He had not considered that his wife might be unfit for, or that she might shrink from, the fashionable world in which all these engrossing pursuits (which, if he had reasoned it out, were intended to fulfil the place

of a husband's love and companionship) were to be found; he began to think of Hester now as a pale, voluntary prisoner, to whom he was fettered by anything but chains of roses or even of gold.

He forgot all his life of debt and anxiety, and sighed for the time when he had no wife to interfere with his comfort and his liberty.

"Ah, Fortescue!" he exclaimed, as he met his friend just as he reached Piccadilly; "what a lucky fellow you are to be a free man still!"

Fortescue took his friend's arm, and they sauntered along together under the trees.

"What's the matter now, Fred? you don't look yourself; and what sort of freedom are you congratulating me on? To tell you the truth, I'm not a fit object for it just now, if you're talking of money."

"Money, no! I was not thinking of money then—though to be hard up is bad enough—I mean you are wise not to have married, that's all."

Fortescue looked serious. Hallam had often advised him: it seemed a fitting moment to give a little counsel in return.

"You must pardon me, Hallam; but of all men I should have thought you might have been congratulated on your marriage."

"You mean because of the money."

"No, the compliment is strictly personal."

Hallam looked round to be certain no one was within hearing.

"I have kept this to myself as long as I could bear it, but now I must tell some one—and it had better be you than any one else, old fellow—because I know you are safe. I don't like my wife."

There was a pause. "I am very sorry to hear you say so," and Fortescue looked really concerned.

"Look here, understand what I mean; she's all very well,—a nice, pretty girl and all that; but it will cost me a fortune to get her educated. I've spent I don't know how much already. Why, she can't even dance. You must see yourself; she makes a courtesy like a charity girl."

It did occur to Fortescue, whose was the money spent, after all? He said, "Well, but she is very young, and all these are superficial grievances. Mrs. Hallam has, I feel persuaded, so

much natural ability and good sense that you might make anything of her."

He spoke earnestly, and yet, strangely enough, it seemed to him that he was not really anxious for a better understanding between Hester and her husband.

Hallam answered, impatiently, "I wish her good sense would teach her a little self-control, then. This morning I went back for something I had forgotten, and, by Jove, she came flying out like a school-girl, and opened the street-door to me herself."

Fortescue laughed.

"That does not seem a very serious offence; some men would be thankful if their wives were as fond of them."

"Oh, nonsense, Percy! I always tell you you are romantic; people don't bother themselves about fondness and love, and that sort of thing, in their wives, in real life, as they do in books—at least if they do it's all pretence—I'm no hypocrite," he said, earnestly, for his friend's contradiction was leading him to say far more than he had at first intended. "I never meant to make a love-marriage. My belief is, love-marriages are twaddle."

Fortescue felt that he ought to say something for the wife.

"Listen to me, and don't think me impertinent, because you began the subject yourself. It seems to me, you see too little of your wife to care much about her."

Hallam shrugged his shoulders.

"I should have thought," Fortescue went on, "that, with your taste and judgment about manner, and your wife's evident devotion to you, you might soon, by a few judicious hints, rectify the little errors you complain of. Think how young you both are; and if you begin now, by taking no pains to find a companion in your wife or to fit her to go with you into society—which last," he added, reluctantly, for he felt strangely unwilling that Hester should lose her present simplicity, in his eyes her greatest charm, "as you value conventional manners so highly, would be your wisest course—let me finish," he added, as Hallam turned away—"how will it be with you both twenty years hence? Instead of having adapted yourselves to each other's ways and tempers, you will have both grown hard and selfish, even if nothing worse happens."

"Fortescue, you've turned parson; but if you knew how heartily I am wishing just at this moment that I'd never seen her, that I'd never been ass enough to marry at all, you'd understand my speaking out as I have done. I haven't said, Heaven knows,

half or anything of what I feel or what I suffer from ; only understand this in so many words—I don't want to excuse it, I believe I was wrong, but it's done now—I never cared two straws about her before I married her—it was only the money ; and now don't let us talk any more about it—it's a hopeless case, which talking will not cure."

"Our roads part here," said his friend, abruptly, "so good-by. When do you start?"

"The first thing to-morrow morning. I wish you'd come. I go alone, of course, with Faulkner and that lot."

"No, I can't change my mind now ; in fact, I have several engagements for the week."

"Well, it's the first time I shall have gone down without you," said Hallam. He was sorry already for the vehemence with which he had received his friend's advice. "But if I find out anything to-morrow that you can turn to any account on Wednesday morning, I'll drop you a line. Good-by."

Fortescue was glad to be alone—to be freed from his friend's unwelcome company. No ; he could scarcely call him his friend now ; his soul had been disappointed and revolted by all that Hallam had said.

To a man of such refined honour as Percy Fortescue, it seemed a living lie to marry a woman solely for her money, and when he thought of Hester, it was impossible not to feel anger against the man who could speak of her as her husband had done.

And there was another feeling that he wanted to be alone to understand. Spite of his wish to see Mrs. Hallam happy and duly appreciated, there mingled in his anger with his friend a feeling of relief ; and now, as he turned into the park to have his musings to himself, he thought he had been hard on Fred. Was it his fault if he could not appreciate or understand such a mind as Hester's ? A delicious pleasurable sensation stole over him as he recalled the last conversation he himself had had with her, and the thorough sympathy she had evinced in his opinions and tastes.

He had been spending much of his time in Gloucester Place lately ; he hoped Hallam would not stay away a whole week ; he supposed it would not quite do to call in his absence, for Hester's society was becoming essential to him. Fortescue had never had a younger sister, and his feeling for her was just what he should have entertained for one—she was so entirely free from coquetry,

he had no fear she would mistake his attentions ; besides, spite of what he had just said to Hallam, he believed she was cold, and would never care much for her husband or any one else, except as a friend ; and therefore, as her husband shrank from taking the first place in her friendship—disliked her even—why should not he be the guide and counsellor she so much wanted, and enjoy in return the charm of seeing such an intellect develop under his fostering care ?

He did not stay much to analyse his feelings, and he resolutely, or more probably unconsciously, shut his eyes to the future ; for the present Hester was neglected, probably unhappy ; it was his duty to brighten her life. His theory did not proceed to show how this duty had devolved on *him* ; but then theories, viewed through the delusive glass of inclination, are apt to be more imperfect and faulty than we imagine. Captain Fortescue did not know it, but he was really in love for the first time in his life. Had he known it, he would have avoided Mrs. Hallam's society, but he was blind.

CHAPTER X.

SELF-DECEIVED.

GOOD-NATURED Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw was in a state of consternation when Lucy told her the contents of Hester's letter.

"Not coming, ain't they ? then it's a great deal too bad," she exclaimed ; "after she'd promised to come and all ; and you and Rachel sitting up, sewing trimming on that new dimity bed, and all the carpets beat and muslin curtains, and getting the spare room so nice. Well, I never ; and I'd ordered, last market-day, two couple of fowl, and nosegays, and I don't know what all, to be brought in to-morrow, thinking you'd be sure and want 'em. I tell you what, Lucy, you may say what you please, but your cousin Hester's grown stuck-up ; she's been mounted up so high with all these London folks, that she can't stoop her head down to see such as you and me are—her own flesh and blood, too ; I've no patience with such fancies, saying she'll come one week, and then changing her mind the next ; shilly-shallying nonsense, it makes me as cross as—as a blue baboon."

Lucy was sadly disappointed, but she could not sit by and hear Hester blamed.

"You must remember, mother, you never liked poor Hester, and I think you are hard upon her now; she has faults, of course—everybody has, but I never saw her shilly-shally about anything; and Jacob says——"

"Ah, of course, Jacob thinks something different to what I do. Really, Lucy, for a girl who used to be fond of having her own way, I don't believe you've an idea of your own in your head, that I don't. It's Jacob says this, and Jacob thinks the other, till I sometimes feel as if he was my husband, too, and I must believe all he says."

"Well, mother," Lucy had turned very red during her mother's speech, "and usen't you to be just the same with my father?"

"Oh, but that was quite a different thing; why, he was your own father, Lucy; you're surely not going to compare any one to him."

Lucy burst out laughing, in spite of her vexation that her mother should speak slightly of Jacob.

"Well, mamma, there never can be any use in talking of one's husband; no one else ever sees him with one's own eyes; but for Hester's sake, I should like you to hear what Jacob says about this letter; may I tell you?"

"Yes, yes, my dear, of course," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, already rather ashamed of what she had said; for she was both fond and proud of her son-in-law, although it was irritating to have his opinion so constantly quoted against her own.

"He thinks that poor Hester has not been allowed to accept our invitation, and that probably her husband wishes her to give up her own relations altogether."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Mrs. Wrenshaw; "and from what I can make out, he owes everything to the poor child. I believe he hadn't a penny to buy boots with when he married her; but still, Lucy, I say again, Hester ought to hold her own; however, Jacob's wrong in one way; the husband can't shut her away from all of us. Old Biz told me some time ago that she believed it was a settled thing, that, after a bit, they were to live at Kirton's Farm."

"But, mamma"—Lucy looked incredulous—"how can Biz know?"

"Well, I don't know, my dear, I didn't ask her; only she seems positive about it; and now, Lucy, don't you go contradicting every word I say. It seems to me, you make amends for

giving up your own way to Jacob, by not letting me have anything right about me."

"Mamma, don't." Lucy stood still for a moment, struggling with her waywardness; then she threw her arms round her mother's neck. "I beg your pardon, and I'm very sorry; but mother, dear, I believe I can't help these naughty fits, if you find fault with Jacob. There, I know what you are going to say—you do it to prevent me from spoiling him; but you may trust me, mother," she said, wiping away her tears, "I do not idolize my husband. I will tell you, if it will make you happier, that I can see his faults, although I like others to be blind to them; but he would not be human if he were perfect, and one thing I am sure of—the nearer and closer we are to a person, the more truly are we able to appreciate their good qualities, and to see how completely these counterbalance any tiny failings."

"There, there," said her mother, kissing her, "don't excite yourself, there's a dear child. You know I love Jacob very much. Good gracious me! what will he say if he finds you with red eyes when he comes in? I don't know what's come over you, you cry twice as easily as you used to."

"Do I?" said Lucy, smiling; she thought to herself that her mother was mistaken, but she would not contradict her again. "When did you see Biz?" she inquired.

"Oh, she came to see me yesterday, poor old thing! Rachel had met her in the street, and told her about Hester's being expected, and she seemed quite in a fuss about it—talked about Mr. Hallam's whiskers, and his boots, and the way he curled 'em in a dish-cover."

"She was very much pleased at the idea of seeing Hester, I suppose," said Lucy, laughing.

"Yes, but you know she's always got a grievance; she keeps 'em ready made, I believe, to suit all occasions. She said she thought Miss Hester might have written to tell her she was coming. Why, in course, she'd have had a new gown and a paper put up in her parlour, as she made no doubt Mr. Hallam and his wife would take tea with her."

"Which I very much doubt, even if they ever come at all, although it wouldn't do to tell Biz so, poor old creature."

"Well," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, looking guilty and confused, "I—I told her so, my dear, and she began to cry and to make such a piece of work, I didn't know how to stop her; and when you think about the thirty pounds a year, and the cottage and all, and

the way she goes on about blackbeetles and toothache, she really is a discontented old worri-cow."

"Jacob says—" began Lucy, but here she remembered, and began to hunt diligently in her work-basket for some seemingly undiscoverable reel of cotton. "Oh, by-the-by," she continued, "don't you think, mamma, it might be as well not to mention this intended visit of Hester's to any one else; you know what a place Stedding is for making mountains out of molehills."

"I'm sure I never said anything of the sort, Lucy. I think Stedding's a very good sort of place; nobody in this world ever got gossiped about who didn't deserve it. However, if you wish the thing to be made a mystery of, of course I shall say nothing; every one knows what a quiet, safe person I am. Of course I told Jemima Skipper that you expected your cousin, but then she never gossips."

"You might as well have told all Stedding," was on Lucy's lips; but she checked herself before the words were uttered, and her mother went on:

"I shall tell her now, that the visit is deferred, that'll be the best way, won't it? Of course, I shan't say what I think; I shall leave her to form her own arguments. Why, good gracious me, here's Jacob; how late it must be!"

Mr. Bonham came in, looking not quite so happy as he usually did to find himself at home again. He was tired and hungry, much too tired to talk, and the sight of his mother-in-law was as unwelcome as the sight of any one but Lucy would have been. But Mrs. Wrenshaw did not remark this. She refused her daughter's invitation to stay and drink tea with them; but, although she said "good-by," and let Jacob rise to open the door for her, she kept him standing quite ten minutes, while she expatiated on the folly of marrying above one's station, and the impossibility of Hester's happiness. At last she noticed his wearied look.

"Good gracious, you're tired out, and I keeping you standing all the while; I'm sure, you're glad to get rid of me, aren't you now?"

And then she went way, not home though, but to her friend Jemima; and soon furnished that able architect with the materials for a first-rate scandal.

"I'm sorry I kept mamma so long, dearest; it was my fault."

"Oh, never mind, so long as I get some tea," said her husband, considerably mollified at finding himself treated as the aggrieved person, when he was conscious of the ungracious looks he had bestowed on his mother-in-law.

Lucy did not say another word till he had put on his slippers and drank a cup of tea, and then she told him what Biz had told her mother.

"I heard that said before the marriage, Lucy, but I did not tell you, because I felt sure it would end in nothing. Is it likely that, with their means of living, and the power to purchase an estate wherever they please, with a gentleman's house on it in good repair, such a man as Mr. Hallam would consent to spend the large sum necessary to make the farm-house even habitable? Besides, Lucy—I don't want to vex you, darling—but your cousin Hester, judging even by her letter, is a very different person from what she was at Kirton's Farm."

"Oh, Jacob! I'm sure she writes as affectionately as ever," said Lucy, indignantly.

It was a sore subject, for, although she had defended him to her mother, she thought, in her secret heart, that Jacob was unjust to Hester. He certainly always had something to say against her; perhaps, young husbands are rarely fond of those among their wives' friends who possess influence over them.

"Now, don't look cross, Lucy, or you'll make me savage. Come and sit here, you old pet; there now," he added, as he put his arm round her; "you'll listen to reason now, won't you? What I mean is—only you are such an impulsive monkey, there's no saying a word, sometimes"—Lucy nestled her head on his shoulder, by way of asking forgiveness—"that Hester is a lady now, and may possibly not care to be reminded of bygones, as Kirton's Farm must infallibly remind her; and for the same reason, darling, I would have you on your guard; don't expect much of Hester; you are so sensitive, that I know how any slight coldness will make you suffer; far better make up your mind at once to give up Hester's affection; your paths in life are quite different, and are not likely to bring you together."

"But, Jacob, suppose you are mistaken; and, oh! suppose, worse than all, that the poor thing is not happy—that her husband does not love her as you do me—will it not be very selfish to give her up till she has shown plainly she no longer cares for me?"

"In my opinion she has done so; this letter is too cold and

guarded in its tone to be written by the unformed girl I remember as your cousin. Depend upon it, she's a woman of the world by this time—and now give me another cup of tea, darling."

Neither of them spoke for a little while. Theirs was a love of such perfect sympathy that, though they had only been a few months married, each knew the other's mood, without need of explanation, or fear of being misunderstood.

To Jacob the delight of sitting in perfect silence, watching his wife's movements, and her pretty little ways, was intense; or, if she were in a talkative mood, he would sit looking and listening, with just a stray word or two of answer, till she often told him she believed, if she repeated the same jokes and stories a hundred times, he would always fancy them new. Sometimes she insisted that it was her turn to be amused, and that he ought to talk to her, or she should become an inveterate chatterbox. But he had always the plea of his hard work during the day; he had to speak constantly, and she had so much rest for her tongue; he always gained his point: perhaps women don't dislike talking so very much, after all. Lucy certainly did not.

Jacob sat now thinking of the difference between the cousins, and how much love Lucy's ardent affectionate nature had lavished on one whom he believed to be as cold as a stone. It made him sad, too, to think how his darling would suffer when she became practically convinced of this truth, for he knew how deeply sensitive her feelings were, although to others this was completely hidden under her laughing vivacious manner. He should be glad when it was all over, and she was reconciled to the loss of her cousin. Probably he was not aware of the hidden jealousy he had for Lucy's affection for any one but himself; but then, poor man! this was not his fault—she worshipped him so entirely, that she had made him exacting.

Lucy was thinking how much she should like to go up to London, and see Hester, and find out if she really were unhappy. She had written to her aunt Wrenshaw, asking if she had seen her, and her aunt had answered her letter, without taking any notice of the inquiry. I have said that Lucy was imaginative in early childhood, and since she had left school (practical routine having dispersed her day-dreams, so long as school life continued) she had lived in an unreal world, for ever forecasting events, and building scenes and incidents upon them, coloured with the bright or sombre tints of her fancy. Now, as she bent over the fire, making Jacob a fresh piece of toast, she conjured up a sorrowful

picture of her cousin, married to a husband who did not appreciate her, for she remarked that Frederic Hallam's name was rarely mentioned in his wife's letters; probably forced to associate with uncongenial people; and oh! perhaps hardest of all to Lucy's free mind, obliged to live in a dingy London house, without any garden or any flowers; this last idea was so overpowering that she could not keep it to herself.

"Oh, how dreadful to think of!"

"What! that you've blackened my toast against the bars, while you've been mooning?" said Jacob, who had been watching her.

"No, you naughty boy, and I've hardly blacked it at all; but think of that poor dear Hester without any flowers."

Jacob laughed. "Why, you little goose, I expect she has much better flowers than you have, and besides, I know by instinct she's not a woman to care about flowers."

"Jacob! but you mean bought flowers; as if there ever can be the same sentiment about flowers that you don't rear yourself."

"And yet I have seen you waste an immense amount of superfluous admiration, which would have been far better bestowed on me, on the wild flowers we gather in the hedges."

"Ah! wild flowers, that's quite different; why, there are no flowers so beautiful as wild flowers. Think of wood anemones and garden ones, will you venture to compare them, sir? or snow-drops either? and look at that nosegay of dog-roses and ferns, that I gathered this morning; will you find anything to beat its freshness and elegance?"

"Well, it does look tasty, but that owes something to the arrangement, I fancy; but if you placed a hothouse bouquet beside it, the want of bright colouring in your wild friends would make them dowdy."

Before Lucy could utter her indignant remonstrance there was a ring at the surgery-bell.

"Poor darling, and so tired as you are," said Lucy, tenderly; "I thought I was going to have you to myself this evening. I shall just go and see who it is, for I believe James went out after you came home, and if it's nothing of consequence I shall make whoever it is wait till he comes back; he's sure not to be long."

But after a short parley, Jacob heard her returning and evidently not alone; heavy hobnails sounded on the uncarpeted floor,

Lucy having left the inner door, which shut the surgery from the house, ajar.

She came in smiling, followed by Peter Stasson.

"It's only Peter, dear, so I thought he could come in here without disturbing you." She gathered up her needlework and went away.

Peter was a much healthier looking man now; he had less hard work to do and more to eat—enough to make any one look healthier, perhaps. By Hester's express desire, as has been said, he had been appointed head man at Kirton's Farm, under the occasional superintendence of Mr. Goldsmith, with much better wages than Farmer Kirton had ever paid him; and now, spite of his wife's shiftless ways, her superior schooling became of service; they occupied part of the farmhouse, and were able to send the children to school in the daytime, so that by evening she was no longer an over-worked, weary woman, but able to help Peter with his farming accounts, which Mr. Goldsmith inspected rigorously once a month.

He had come up now to get some medicine for the pain in his back left by the fever.

Jacob prescribed the necessary remedies, and gave him what medicine he required, and after asking a few questions about the children, he hoped Peter would depart; but the man lingered.

"What is it, Peter? can I do anything else for you?"

"Well, doctor, I do want a word more wi' ye. Folks ha' been a-tellin' I that Muss Heaster be a-comin' for to stay along o' you and yur missus; and I——"

"You want to know when she's coming? Well then, Peter, —for the present not at all; she cannot leave London just now; in fact, I don't expect we shall see her in this part of the world for a long time to come."

"You'll excuse me, doctor, but Mr. Goldsmith, when he wur down at farm, he seemed to think us shouldn't bide there much longer; he said us must turn out soon to make room for Muss Heaster and her good man."

"What! did he say they were going to live at Kirton's Farm? Impossible," said Mr. Bonham, surprised and annoyed out of all self-possession.

"Well, doctor, he didn't quite as much as say for good-an-all," said Peter. "My mussus's notion wur that thay be thinkin' o' comin' for the summer-time loike, and real hearty us'll all be to see Muss Heaster again, God bless her!"

"Well, good-night, Peter. If I were you, I wouldn't set my heart upon her coming; I've no belief Mr. Goldsmith was in earnest, or if he were, there's no saying Mr. Hallam may be of the same way of thinking; I don't think Kirton's Farm would suit his notions."

"There bean't no love lost atween the doctor and Muss Heaster's good man, I'm thinkin'," said quiet, observant Peter to himself, as he trudged back to Kirton's Farm.

Jacob Bonham stood in the surgery, thinking over what he had just heard, and confused with the mental tumult in his mind the news had created. He felt that it would be most injurious to his peace, would perhaps destroy all his domestic happiness, if the Hallams took up their permanent residence at Kirton's Farm. He was sure he could never like Frederic Hallam or make a companion of him! besides, he was just the sort of man who would patronize, and patronage was to Jacob, with all his easy *débonnaire* ways, what it is to most right-minded men, insufferable. Then Hester, he knew, did not love his Lucy as she deserved, and if they had to meet often, and as neighbours they would do so, he could not suffer his darling's feelings to be hurt by slights and coldness. But he would not believe they were coming to the farm. Jacob was not the only man who has hesitated to give credit to what he does not wish to happen; no doubt Mr. Goldsmith had not spoken decidedly—a story never loses in the telling—and Mr. and Mrs. Hallam might be quite unconscious of any intention of revisiting the farm.

At any rate the best and kindest way was not to tell Lucy what Peter had said—she would be sure to write to Hester and urge her to come—and after the slighting way in which their invitation had been treated, there was no need that she should write to her cousin at all.

He was surprised not to feel quite calm and easy when he had made this determination. Was it because this was the first secret he had ever kept from his wife? But her smiling face, when she came downstairs again, soon chased away the cloud of disquiet.

Perhaps it was a pity she came so soon; if the cloud had swelled and blackened, the lightning ray of truth might have darted from it, and have helped him, by its momentary brilliance, to analyse his motives more closely than he was in the habit of doing, for good as Jacob was, he was not very earnest-minded as yet.

One of his unconfessed causes of dislike to the Hallams and their influence over Lucy was, that, beside the husband, he feared to feel awkward and country-bred ; and another reason, that his independence revolted from the acquaintance of those so much richer than himself. He was not afraid of feeling envy of their riches, but he had disliked inviting them to his house, lest they might think he was courting them for the sake of their wealth.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EVE OF THE STORM.

HESTER was really dull and lonely ; she had begged her husband so earnestly to send her news of his safe arrival at Tatton, that she had received a few hastily written lines the morning after his departure, but two whole days had gone by since then, and there were still two more to be passed alone.

She was pained and surprised, too, at not hearing from Lucy. Jacob wronged Hester when he thought her insensible to her cousin's affection ; she had not cared much for it before her marriage ; jealousy of Lucy's superior advantages and education had often made her repel her demonstrative love : but then her whole nature was lethargic and undeveloped. Now that she had known what it was to love herself, she felt grateful when she reflected on Lucy's fondness, and had resolved on a different line of conduct towards her, when she should be once more at Kirton's Farm. But as day after day went by, and no answer came, she grew anxious and unhappy. Too proud and reserved to risk the chance of a rebuff by writing again, she told herself that, after all, Lucy's was a shallow nature. Many people, besides Hester, seem to think there can be no depth, and only evanescent warmth, in an impulsive temperament, forgetting that this is a physical rather than a mental attribute, and may be found united to the most unswerving constancy.

Hester had been jealous of Lucy formerly, but not of her love for her ; it had been so plainly shown, so freely given, that she assumed it as a personal right. She had not thought enough of it to doubt it ; but now her jealousy took another direction ; Lucy's love for her own husband had made her selfish ; she had merely asked her to Stedding as a formal compliment—did not care, in

fact, whether she went there or not; if she had been still the Lucy of old times, she would have written an ardent outpouring of regret, when she received Hester's letter.

There may be, and doubtless are, much bitterer feelings; but human nature is wrenched severely when an unexpected defection of this kind forces itself on our conviction. We think ourselves—nay, have abundant proof—that we are loved, petted, almost idolized, by the admiring reverence of a friend, for whom (sometimes, because we have an innate, although unconscious, shrinking from a shallower nature than our own, oftener perhaps because our hearts are otherwise occupied) we do not feel an equally warm affection; we are content with loving them; they are our friends for life, dearer perhaps than any, except wife, or husband, or child. Suddenly, how or why, we know not, we wake to the certainty that we are dethroned. It is not like the treachery or the coldness of our nearest and dearest, the one who shares our heart of hearts—for I do not believe there is room for more than one in its inmost recesses—but still it is bitter: the shock to self-love is as great as that to affection; we are discrowned; our smiles, our opinions, are no longer valued; we did not know till we lost it, how dear all this was.

One calls this *désillusion*—one gets used to it as one grows older, but it is a heart-hardening process.

Beyond the unsatisfied feeling about her husband, which had been growing so much stronger of late, this defection of Lucy's was really Hester's first lesson in life's deceits; it seemed as if she had lost something that was hers of right, and she looked upon Jacob Bonham as a thief who had stolen away her cousin's love. It seemed doubly cruel when she was feeling lonely and deserted without her husband. If Fred had only taken her to Stedding all would have been right between her and Lucy; and now, by the time they went to live at Kirton's Farm (for she still hoped for this), Lucy would be perfectly indifferent whether she ever saw her again. She could not write—it would be mean and cringing to beg for an affection that was plainly on the wane; besides, what good would come of it; it might make Lucy hypocritical; she might profess what she could no longer feel, rather than seem unkind—no, she would not write.

But this resolution made Hester harder and older. Self-dependence rarely softens a woman, and her husband was included in this change of feeling.

She wondered if other husbands left their wives to be as

dreary and lonely as she was. Certainly in this instance it was her own doing. She had refused to go to Wilton Place, and that same morning she had walked out with her maid in the Regent's Park, and as she returned saw that Mrs. Hallam's carriage had just driven up to her door; without deigning any explanation to Parkins, she walked quickly up the street again, nor turned till she felt sure the unwelcome visitor must have driven away.

"She did not come from kindness," said Hester proudly, to herself; "she only came to pry into how I employ my time in Fred's absence. I should wish her to think that I go out and amuse myself; it will show her I am quite independent of her, and give her something to talk about."

She thought to herself that no one, not even Fred, knew how diligently she had been turning to account the many solitary hours she had passed, in hard work for her French and Italian masters. She was taking lessons in German, too, but she knew her husband did not care about travelling in Germany, and therefore she was more desirous of perfecting herself in Italian, in the hope that they might revisit Rome, although her own choice would have led her to the more difficult language; perhaps she would have enjoyed the conquest over its grammar more thoroughly than she would have appreciated its literary treasures; as yet, she preferred learning to reading. But who does not enjoy the development of a new faculty? It is not vanity—but it is among the most exquisite of purely human sensations, to make acquaintance, as it were, with this stranger in one's own mind—to see it struggling into life, daily growing in strength, finally walking alone, and dragging us along with it, forced in some mysterious, incomprehensible manner to set it free—to give it utterance. The intellectual part of Hester's memory till now had scarcely been tried; it was delightful to her to find how much it could retain. She began to speak French more than correctly now—with elegance; her pronunciation improved daily, but her accent was faulty and monotonous; her keen intelligence told her that a few months' residence in Paris among French people would do more for this than any teaching, now that she was such a proficient in the language, although her professor shook his head, and hinted that unless this was attempted at a much earlier age, it would be useless.

Hester was resolute. She knew she should never be a musician or an artist, but she was determined to excel in something.

This morning her resolves had taken a more definite form. She had found, on her return from her walk, a few lines from her aunt Wrenshaw, telling her that she and her husband were on the eve of starting for Paris, where they intended to stay some months, as they had let their house and furniture to a friend.

Oh! if Fred would only take her to Paris in the autumn, as he had once promised he would, how intensely happy her life would be! She should be able to talk French all day long, for he would be sure to make some acquaintances, and then if he went out and left her, instead of being dull and lonely as she was now, her aunt would always be within reach. She smiled at herself the next minute: aunt Wrenshaw lived in London, and yet they never met. Probably Hester felt by instinct, what so many people experience in reality, that a singular amount of sympathy and liking will spring up between those who meet on foreign ground, though they never dreamed of being even companionable on their own soil.

Perhaps the separation of his wife from her aunt had been almost as great a mistake of Frederic Hallam's as his marriage—she would have been Hester's good genius. She would at any rate have spared her those hours of self-communion, so unprofitable when bent earthwards. She would have given her the love her heart was secretly, though unconsciously, pining for, and would have prevented the scorching process it was now undergoing, and which a strong unelastic nature rarely recovers from.

But Hester had not much leisure to meditate this afternoon. Her French master was coming at three o'clock, for a two hours' lesson. She was working extra hard in Fred's absence from home, and this afternoon she became so interested in the course of study planned for the next two days, that she hurried through dinner, resolved to work all the evening.

So absorbed had she become in composing a French letter to her husband, that she did not hear a knock at the street door, nor feet on the stairs, and she started in great surprise, when the drawing-room door was thrown open, and Captain Fortescue was announced.

She blushed brightly as she rose to welcome him; there had been no possibility of hiding her books and dictionary, so he must know her secret. She had considered herself so perfectly free from evening visitors during Fred's absence.

A flush came into Captain Fortescue's face also, and he did

not look as self-possessed as usual ; but Hester was so intent upon securing his secrecy that she did not observe it.

He apologized for such an intrusion, but Mr. Hallam had asked him to deliver a message—personally.

The colour died out of Hester's cheeks ; she began to fear her husband was ill ; but she did not speak.

“ He sends his love ; he is quite well, and will perhaps stay away some days longer.”

“ I expected Mr. Hallam the day after to-morrow,” she said, abruptly.

She felt angry with Fortescue, it seemed to her that she ought to have been written to instead of him.

“ And you are very much disappointed, I fear. You must be dull, so much alone.”

“ Oh, no,” said Hester ; she could not bear pity even from Captain Fortescue. “ Of course I miss my husband greatly ; but you see I have plenty to do in his absence ;” she pointed to her books.

Fortescue looked as if he did not understand, and Hester, after enjoining him not to betray her secret, told him how she spent her lonely hours, and how anxious she was to surprise her husband with her progress.

He listened in astonishment and admiration : at her age, with her attractions, to have the resolution and self-denial to forego all lighter occupation and recreation, and work as hard as a school-girl, and for what ? to gratify and surprise a man who had no love for her, and who would not appreciate the sacrifice.

He did not reply ; he was musing over his friend's indifference to so much loving devotion.

Till now he had fancied Hester cold, but the warm light in her eyes and the eager flush on her cheeks betrayed her love for her husband to be far deeper than he had ever suspected.

The revelation irritated him, he scarcely knew why ; he had insensibly grown to fancy himself necessary to Hester's happiness, and yet her thoughts were not with him now. How could she be so slavish as to bestow affection where it was neither valued nor returned ? Surely, if she showed a little spirit and resentment, Fred might be brought back to his duty.

He felt the ardent desire we experience, when we hear a thoroughly undeserving person praised, to undeceive Mrs. Hallam, to open her eyes to the truth, or rather, to the falsehood of her husband's conduct towards her,—but how could he speak of such

things to a wife? He had scarcely ever felt so contradictory. Must he let her go on in blindness, lavishing all her love where it was so completely wasted?

Hester looked up, surprised at his continued silence.

"But, perhaps, you think I am not making any progress," she said, doubtfully, for Fortescue still held a page of French manuscript in his hand; "and, perhaps, he will not think so either."

Fortescue laid the paper down with an impatient gesture; he could scarcely restrain himself from speaking out.

"I should not think it of much consequence what Hallam thinks about it."

"Why not? I don't understand you," said Hester, her head thrown back, and her eyes fixed on him with a look of dignified surprise.

"I meant—that—that as he is not certainly so good a French scholar as you must be by this time, his judgment cannot much signify. He is not much of a linguist, I believe." Fortescue reddened, and spoke with hesitation.

His manner puzzled her. She had thought he loved Fred almost as well as she did; it was the first time any one had ventured to speak disparagingly of her husband, and her indignation was roused. But Hester rarely spoke or acted upon impulse. Captain Fortescue's words meant more than they implied; his manner had been strangely variable, and he had seemed ill at ease. Perhaps Fred had quarrelled with him, but then he would not have made him the bearer of a message from him. At any rate, she did not choose to hear him find fault with her husband.

"What is the matter, Captain Fortescue? is there any—anything wrong between you and Fred? *You* are the last person I should have expected to blame him."

Fortescue's pride was now roused by her harsh, abrupt manner; he saw he had displeased her, but she had chosen him, or he considered that she had chosen him, for her friend and adviser, and he must justify his words. Her cold, stern, expectant look gave him little time to reason with himself.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Hallam," he said, very seriously, "there has not been any quarrel between your husband and myself, although I have taken upon me to remonstrate with him lately about his conduct."

"His conduct!" repeated Hester to herself, so overcome by

surprise at his daring as to have no power of answering readily.

"Mrs. Hallam, you have honoured me with your friendship, or I should shrink from saying this.—I have remonstrated with your husband, as his intimate friend, about his neglect of so good and loving a wife as you are. I have seen it with the greatest pain."

She stood speechless; every right and true feeling warring against what she felt to be an unwarrantable interference, and above all prevailed deep, intense mortification that he should have seen and commented on what her heart too surely told her was the truth.

There was a dead silence.

At length Hester spoke; but her words came slowly at first, as if she were lost in thought.

"What business is it of yours, Captain Fortescue?" she said, all the old unpolished abruptness of her early girlhood returning in this moment of intense feeling, rendered harsher still, perhaps, by the strong curb she was yet able to maintain over the passionate anger that was fast rising. "No one asked you to interfere between me and Mr. Hallam; and I beg you will not call yourself my friend. I do not want a friend who speaks against my husband when he is away. It is not friendship either, but impertinence, to speak as you have done."

Fortescue was too self-convicted, too deeply mortified with himself, to attempt a reply; he gave one glance at Hester, whose darkening face was fixed on the door, as if to show her eagerness for his departure, and quietly bowing he left her alone.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT HAPPENED AT TATTON.

It was not altogether from indifference that Frederic Hallam had not written again to his wife.

When he started on that Monday morning, all looked bright and promising, so far as the weather and the equipment of the drag were concerned, and he was in high spirits; but when the party reached the railway station, he was annoyed to find a man waiting with a note from Mr. Faulkner, stating that he and one of his

friends, the only two members of the set with whom Hallam was on intimate terms, and with whom he cared to associate, would not be able to accompany them to Tatton.

An undefined feeling of dislike and distrust of the rest of the party gathered in his mind as he looked at them, and he had half a mind to withdraw; and when too "horsey"-looking men, with bullet-heads scantily covered with hair, and cheeks like a quarenden apple, presented themselves as friends of the others, and candidates for the places left vacant by Faulkner's defection, he felt still more reluctant to trust himself alone in such company. But the heavy risk depending on the race, faith in his own sharpness, and his sense of good-fellowship prevailed; nor could he well draw back now. Moreover, once at Tatton, he might easily find more congenial associates, and probably—here a bright idea occurred to his inventive mind, always on the look-out for expedients—there would be something to be learned worth knowing from the set he was among at present.

So lighting his cigar, and casting care to the winds, he was soon deep in conversation with one of the apple-cheeked personages above mentioned.

As soon as they had reached Tatton station, and were again mounted on their vehicle, for the course was some distance from the railway, they found themselves in the thronged road always to be found in the vicinity of "the races."

Among the numerous carriages filled with fair and fashionably dressed ladies that they passed on their way, he recognized Lady Helena Fortescue. She looked first surprised, and then pleased—unmistakably pleased—Hallam fancied, to see him, and he returned her bow with *empressement* and his winning smile.

She was really pleased to see him again; he had not kept his promise of calling on her, so that she had fancied he was going to shut himself up till the awkward, over-grown country girl he had married—for she knew she was this—was polished and presentable. She had never forgotten the first account her brother-in-law had given her of Hallam's marriage; that it was one of purely mercenary motives. Fortescue had not seen her alone since; no one ever had much opportunity of seeing Lady Helena alone in the height of the London season, and even if he had, he would have been chary of praising Hester to her; she could not tolerate praise of any woman too young to be her grandmother, and something made him dread the ridicule with

which she would have met his admiration of a country-bred girl.

Lady Helena had felt secretly pleased to see Hallam alone at the theatre; but then he had evaded her inquiry after his wife, by saying she had another engagement; this was, of course, possible; still, although Lady Helena was not likely to encourage the admiration of a married man, it was pleasant to her self-love, that, after having admired her, he had not lost his taste so sadly as to be in love with his country wife; and his being at the races alone was a proof of this; at any rate, his coming to Tatton a day beforehand was suspicious evidence. She was staying with friends in the neighbourhood, and should therefore, in all probability, see a good deal of Mr. Hallam during the race week.

But to her surprise she did not see him again, either that day or the next, although she visited the race-course; but, on the third day, the great day of the races, she suddenly saw him among the gentlemen on a drag which had lately placed itself beside her carriage.

He returned her bow, far more gravely and coldly than the last time; but she was determined he should speak to her, and she beckoned him round to the other side, so that she could talk without being overheard.

He obeyed the summons, though he showed no haste in doing so, and had nothing to say when he came.

"You look grave and sad, Mr. Hallam; I hope you have no cause for anxiety."

Hallam laughed, but in a forced, unnatural way.

"You know, Lady Helena, we men have something more serious at stake, when the Tatton Cup is run for, than a few pairs of gloves."

"I ought to know it," she said, looking pointedly at her husband, who was sitting on the box-seat, eagerly studying a note he held in his hand; "if there were no Tatton Cup, Mr. Hallam, it might be much better for Mr. Gerald Fortescue. You are a lucky man; you see I only brought my husband an empty title, whereas your wife is said to have filled your purse; and also seems to give you full leave to empty it without her supervision. I should not trust *my* husband alone at Tatton Races," and then she laughed unpleasantly.

Her words and manner were equally annoying. Why need she talk of his wife at all? he had never mentioned her of

his own accord, and her allusion to the money was in very bad taste.

"I don't suppose Mrs. Hallam cares about the races," he said, carelessly; "at any rate, she is much better at home;" then looking towards his friends, he said, "if you will excuse me, I must say good-day; I see I am waited for," and raising his hat, without even waiting for the hand-shaking he would once have so much valued, he returned to his seat, nor did he again look round at Lady Helena during the remainder of the day.

I have said before enough to intimate that she was not a woman to make an enemy of, and now she was very angry. That she had brought Hallam's reply on herself by her covert impertinence, was nothing. Lady Helena was not likely to judge herself severely; there is no knowing what secret understanding she maintained with her conscience, but even her husband had never heard her own herself in the wrong; perhaps, she thought that with so weak and, at the same time, so stubborn a mind as Gerald Fortescue's, if she once betrayed consciousness of a flaw in the harness in which she held him, he might snap it beyond her power of readjustment.

Now she looked beautifully terrible in her anger. That a nobody like Mr. Hallam, and one who had degraded himself by a *mésalliance*, should dare to bandy words with her, to administer reproof to her, for he had almost said Tatton race-course was not a fit place for ladies, was not to be endured. His subsequent contemptuous indifference to her presence deepened the insult—neglect was a thing she never pardoned—and as it left her no immediate means of vengeance, her anger rankled into hatred. There could be only one reason for Hallam's behaviour—he *was* in love with his awkward country-bred wife after all—and to the wound his contradiction had inflicted was added the deeper sting to her imperious vanity, that another woman's influence should enable any man so completely to resist hers, although she were his wife.

She would be revenged on them both. She wondered what sort of creature this could be, who, married only for her money, was yet able to fascinate a man whose taste had been refined by the society of such a woman as herself.

"She must have some power and strength of will, too," mused Lady Helena: "mere prettiness and good-nature would not subjugate Mr. Hallam. It would be too much trouble, or I

should like to show her how changeable he is. I wonder what she is like ? ”

And then she went on pondering the possibility of Mrs. Hallam being aware that her husband had not married her for love. If she were of a strong decided nature, such a revelation would surely cut short the domestic felicity she seemed to be enjoying. Lady Helena hated shams, and there was no sham so absurd as that of people who affected a turtle-dove fondness six months after marriage. Why did she and Mr. Fortescue live on such excellent terms ? Simply because they saw so little of each other, and because there had never from the first been any nonsense between them. She was one of those women—one hopes they are rare, although there are such—who never reason under provocation, or make the slightest effort towards self-government ; but only, like fabled furies, lash themselves into something nearly resembling madness, with the snaky coils of passion, pride and self-will, no matter how small the provocation. Lady Helena’s fiat had gone forth that her will was to be sovereign law to all around her. She had willed, almost unconsciously, to retain the admiration of Frederic Hallam, and to ignore the existence of his wife ; and now that he should not only dare to slight her, but to hold up that wife’s example as one she might do well to follow—for so she had interpreted his reply—was an offence to be signally revenged, and she threw herself back in her carriage to meditate on the means.

Hallam meanwhile was plunged in gloomy thought ; if Lady Helena had not been too angry she might have considered that his serious face and captious behaviour were hardly those of a happy husband.

During the two days that he had passed in the society of his new acquaintances, the younger of them had so ingratiated himself by his simplicity and off-handed frankness of manner, that Hallam had given up all idea of joining another party on the race-course. This man who was, he imagined, far more wealthy than he seemed, had offered in a lazy sleepy way to take such large odds against a horse that his companion asserted to be far more likely to win than either of the favourites, that Hallam, thrown off his guard, and forgetting all prudence in the prospect of so easy a harvest, risked far beyond the sum he had tried to extort from Goldsmith, and about which the lawyer had, to the last, declined making any definite promise. But then Hallam had argued there was no risk in what he was doing ; in fact, unless the very worst luck befell him, it was certain gain, and would richly cover any

losses he might incur on his first ventures. But on the morning of this day, a few words of a whispered conversation, accidentally overheard, had made him anxious. He looked hard at the speakers; there could be no mistake about them; they were his two apple-cheeked acquaintances. It was quite plain from what they had said, that they were acting unfairly by some one; but when he went up to them suddenly, they seemed in no way confused, and the excessive cordiality of their greeting convinced him that *he* was not to be the victim of their schemes.

"It's in the nature of these men," he thought, "to live on the ill-luck and mistakes of their fellows; it's their trade, in fact; but then I believe they are to be trusted sometimes, and when they are, of course their information is worth having. I know enough of human nature to be sure it was nothing but contradiction, because his friend and I praised up Sunbeam last night, that made that fellow Triggs take such odds against him. I believe I'm safe to win."

Still with all this plausible satisfactory reasoning, he was very anxious and restless; if—and he scarcely dared to face the if—he lost, he should be completely in Goldsmith's power, and his pride revolted from the idea of applying to his mother or his aunt; besides, how could they help him? These debts, supposing they should prove so, must be paid at once, and how could any such feeble aid as theirs liquidate so vast an amount?

But Care and Frederic Hallam never could consort for long together, and he was soon eagerly excited in watching the start, which was some time in accomplishing.

At last the horses were fairly off.

It seemed an instant—and then where was Sunbeam? He strained his eyes eagerly over the course; the horse was emphatically "nowhere;" but he saw her come in lame some time after all was over.

The whole scene spun round before Hallam's eyes; he had lost before, but then he had never made so fearful a venture: still he would not abandon hope altogether; the other horse that was to run for the Beechwood stakes in the afternoon must win; he knew all about that; and in his excitement he positively increased the odds he had taken in its favour.

His two new friends had said in the morning they were pledged to join another party at dinner-time, and Hallam felt relieved by their absence. Whether he had been duped or not, his simple-looking friend had certainly had the best of it. It gave

him an aguish feeling when he thought how triumphantly Goldsmith would sneer. He would look upon him as a mere boy not fit to be trusted with money. But why need he be beholden to Goldsmith in the matter? could he not raise the sum he wanted on the security of his wife's inheritance? But, then, that inheritance was so entirely in the lawyer's hands, and had been kept such a secret, that he scarcely saw how this was to be effected without Goldsmith's knowledge, and in that case he might as well go to him direct.

The unusual worry and annoyance were telling upon him, and when dinner-time came, he drank far more than he was accustomed to, in the hope of reviving his flagging spirits.

They did revive almost madly, and then came the excitement of the race in which he had so deep an interest.

He was not dull or care-worn now.

Even Lady Helena as she glanced up, spite of her angry feelings towards him, was obliged to confess how very handsome, how animated he looked, as bending eagerly forward he stood, watch in hand, his eyes strained in a fixed gaze on the horse on which now his fate depended.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FENCING MATCH.

CAPTAIN FORTESCUE, as he walked home after his interview with Hester, did not feel that it was himself that his legs were carrying. Surely he had been bewitched, transformed into some one else. That he, fastidious, almost overstrained, in his delicacy about interfering in the affairs of others, should by some strange fatality or glamour, as it now seemed to him, have been led to utter so gross an impertinence to a wife—it was the first error he could ever remember to have committed against good-breeding. What could have prompted him, or rather what power was it that had dragged the words to his tongue? for it had seemed to him that against his actual will he had been forced to speak of Hester's husband.

And what end had it served?

It had mortified and degraded him in his own eyes and in hers. Instead of giving the good advice which he thought she

really needed in order to secure better treatment from such a man as Hallam, he had just said enough to make her miserable ; for if she were happy and contented with her lot—and what right had he to suppose, when he recalled the expression of her eyes when she talked of surprising her husband, that she was not ?—he had shown her that others saw what she did not feel, and must have occasioned her the keenest mortification. The belief that he had given Hester pain was more intolerable than the remembrance of his own unwarrantable behaviour. He felt that he could not meet her again with any composure for some time to come ; he did not know why, but the longing for her society seemed to have passed away, now that it was evident his was not necessary to her happiness.

By degrees, as his self-love recovered from the shock he had himself administered, he began to reflect upon Hester's conduct in the matter, and decided that she had been very very rude and coarse in her way of speaking to him, and that, however fascinating she might be, she certainly was not a lady.

Why not avoid all chance of seeing her again ? The season would soon be over now ; he was tired of London already ; why need he wait ? he had plenty of country invitations, some from people who rarely visited London at all, and therefore would be especially glad of his presence when all their neighbours had deserted them. He had scarcely ever seen the country in June ; he thought it must be very charming and refreshing after the dust and heat of London.

He was surprised the next day to receive a note from Lady Helena ; he read it twice over before he could recover himself, and then he was as much at a loss as ever to guess its true meaning, yet if a stranger had read it, he would not have remarked anything worthy of wonder in its simple wording.

It was a request to her brother-in-law, to call on her in the course of the day, as she so much wanted to talk to him about Tatton races.

"I wonder what she really does want ? Tatton races, too !" thought Percy Fortescue, as he prepared, as soon as the afternoon cooled, to obey her summons ; "fortunately for my complaisance, I have an engagement within two or three doors of Gerald's, or I fear I should not have obeyed her ladyship so punctually."

Helena Fortescue had never before made herself so agreeable to her brother-in-law.

She was pleased and surprised with his ready compliance.

She had feared he would, with his usual penetration, have suspected some hidden motive in her request. To say truth, Captain Fortescue was perhaps, in general, less courteous to his sister-in-law than to any other lady of his acquaintance; and this not because she was his sister-in-law—he was so real a gentleman, that he would have thought this gave her an additional claim on his good-breeding—but because he saw that she did not make Gerald happy, and that she was an extravagant and heartless woman.

Besides, as he had never paid her any of the worship she lived for, she had never tried to make herself fascinating to him, and he was not a fair judge of her powers of pleasing; true in this case, as in so many others, that if we do not take the trouble to unfold our best qualities to our fellows, theirs will be hermetically sealed up from us for ever.

But whether, as has been said, his ready call pleased her, or that, for some reason she really wished for his good opinion, she was thoroughly cordial and sisterly.

She gave so vivid and animated an account of the races, that Fortescue was greatly amused, and quite entered into the ludicrous picture she drew of some of the scenes she had witnessed.

Presently Fortescue asked her if she saw Hallam there.

“Yes, I saw him,” said Lady Helena, “and I was sorry to see him there without his wife.”

“I can account for that: he told me he was pledged to go with a set of rather fast men; it would not have been at all the sort of society for her to have been mixed up with.”

“Oh, I fancied, from the story you told me about your friend’s marriage, that she was probably a person he would not much care to be seen in public with.” She spoke with a smiling indifference.

“I had not then seen her, and I believe, Helena,” he added, forcing a laugh to hide the discomfiture he felt, that she should have broached so painful a topic, “you and I have both lived long enough in the world to be aware, that what is said by the omnipotent and ubiquitous *they* is not always to be depended on. I have often thought,” he went on, “that it might be useful, and amusing also, to book all that the immortal ‘they’ is reported to have uttered on any given topic; it would probably be found that the list contained innumerable words, actions, and motives, which the persons mentioned or accused would truly plead as being among ‘Things not generally known’ to them.”

Lady Helena smiled, but she was not to be diverted from her purpose.

"The story was false, then, and it is entirely a marriage of affection?"

She tried to compel truth out of him by her earnest fixed look, but he had turned away—he did not care to meet her eyes just then—and affected to be deep in the examination of a piece of old china on the table. Had he noticed her eager, passionate expression, he would have been more guarded in his answer.

"I never yet asked Mrs. Hallam the question, but she is charming enough to command the love of any man."

Helena trembled visibly, between anger and impatience to hear more. Still he did not look at her, and she was obliged to say something to continue the subject.

"I am more and more surprised. From his manner one would scarcely have imagined him so very *devoted* a husband;" and then she threw down her eyes, for she saw Fortescue start, and could not quite brave his look at that moment. How easily a falsehood is suggested by a conscious look—a timid manner—while the strongest asseveration, where the face is not dressed in fitting livery, fails to convince!

Captain Fortescue at once imagined that Hallam still cherished his former admiration, and had resumed the homage he had formerly paid to his sister-in-law, and, although he knew her too well to dread that she would give him any serious encouragement, it grieved him that Hester was wronged by any devotion shown by her husband to another woman.

He felt angry with Helena, and determined to mortify her triumphant vanity.

"Men do not generally parade their affection for their wives," he said, with an irrepressible sneer. "But what I am telling you now, Helena, you may rely on as true. Mrs. Frederic Hallam is the loveliest woman I ever saw, and is as clever and fascinating as she is beautiful." He felt a double pleasure in saying this.

He looked keenly at her, but her woman's wit had guessed his intention. She was used to fencing matches with Percy Fortescue, and, except a slight movement of the lower jaw, her face was calm and unmoved—her eyes bent on the ground.

"Why did you not tell me this before?" she said; "you give me quite an anxiety to see this paragon. I shall insist that Mr. Hallam brings his wife to see me."

"You would not judge her favourably, I think, at first sight ;

she is shy with strangers. You had better ask her to your next reception, Helena," he went on, feeling that the best way of preventing any intimacy with Hester would be to arouse dread of her rival charms; "she would make a sensation, I can tell you."

Spite of her rigid self-control, the light flashed from her eyes now. But she was determined he should not see that she was jealous of a country girl.

"Ah! very likely, but I don't intend to give another reception this season," she said, languidly. "Gerald's ill-luck at Tatton has settled that question. But where do your friends live? They have a house of their own by this time, I suppose."

"No, they have not—they are still in lodgings." He felt strangely unwilling to tell her where Hester lived, yet it was an absurd reticence, as if such a woman as Helena would care to make the acquaintance of one out of her "set," and, moreover, younger and more beautiful than she was.

"Ah! then you need not tell me. I remember you said before, No. 60, Gloucester Place."

He set her right as to the number, which, by the way, she had guessed at; for in her now settled desire to see Hester, she dreaded lest innumerable obstacles should come in her way. Probably if her brother-in-law had evaded the question, her quick intelligence would soon have obtained the clue she sought, and which she knew was not to be found in the Court Guide.

"I think," she said, throwing herself back on her sofa, with what really was a sigh of relief from the severe mental effort she had maintained, but which she meant to express weariness, "that this country lady should feel highly flattered by the length of time we have been discussing her; if you were not so impenetrably indifferent, Percy, I should begin to suspect you admired her yourself. But now tell me what you think of my new purchase, which I see you have been examining so attentively."

He nearly let the china fall. Her words sounded so like irony, and yet they were aimed at random, merely to glide gracefully to some other topic, without giving him any suspicion of the real subject of her meditations.

He soon after found an excuse for leaving; it seemed as if every moment she might make some fresh allusion to Hester, and he wished to avoid the pain it caused him. He felt troubled and anxious enough as it was. If he could have seen Helena a few moments after he left her, he would perhaps have regretted his praise of another woman's beauty, and have thought that the cloud

on his spirits was one of those mysterious warnings so often sent to us as the herald of coming storm.

His sister-in-law had succeeded in one point. She had so completely discomfited and disturbed him, that he quite forgot to wonder afresh what had been her object in seeking this interview.

CHAPTER XIV.

HESTER'S VISITOR.

IT is difficult to describe the effect Fortescue's words had produced on Hester; she would have found it difficult herself to say which was the feeling that reigned uppermost of the throng that now agitated her mind beyond any power of will to quiet.

Perhaps the strongest, at any rate the most vehement, was proud anger against Captain Fortescue. His interference and his suspicions were as unjustifiable as the slighting manner in which he had spoken of her husband. No, nothing could be so bad as that; how dared he—he to whom Fred was always so kind, so full of praise and friendship? And then—for she still loved her husband dearly; she was still partially blind to his faults—she compared him mentally with Captain Fortescue, and thought how in every way Fred was his superior. She had had too little of her husband's society to find out his intellectual deficiencies, since her newly-awakened powers had enabled her to prize and estimate truly what she would have called scholarship. She believed Fortescue to be mean and jealous; the truth was, he envied Fred his frank light-heartedness, his power of diffusing merriment at will. She did not go farther and inquire the reason of his jealousy; as yet she was free from vanity, and she was too angry to think about him at all, except in regard to his rudeness.

She did not analyse her feelings sufficiently to know how much mortification had to do with her wrath. But as days wore on, and she grew calmer, her heart became more and more depressed; the future looked sadly blank and dreary. Spite of the assurances Fred had given her, it was strange and startling that the thoughts and doubts which had been growing up so steadily in her mind should be uttered to her from without, by a person, too, who had been kinder to her than any one since her

marriage, and who seemed to have forced himself, as it were, out of his usual quiet gentleness to speak them at all.

Her eyes fell upon her books ; would her husband care for all the labour and pain she had taken ? She rose and paced the room impatiently : how could she bear this suspense ?—Fred would not return for some days—and yet how could she speak to him of what his friend had said ?

But she would not allow herself to continue in this state of doubt and agitation ; she sat down determined to come to some decision as to her conduct to her husband.

It was not an easy matter : her thoughts were tangled and confused, as they had never been before ; she began to think she would put off this wearying self-communion till next morning, and try for this afternoon to throw her mind again into her studies ; but she disliked procrastination, it was foreign to her character, and she had just resolved to bend her rebellious will to its unwelcome task, when the sound of carriage-wheels rolling up to the door made her pause and listen.

The street door was opened before she could ring, or she would have refused to admit a visitor ; she only knew of Mrs. Hallam who would be likely to call on her in a carriage, and the rustling of silk on the staircase as the visitor mounted to the drawing-room, confirmed the belief.

She was surprised when Lady Helena Fortescue's card was brought down to her.

She felt really nervous now ; she had a secret dread and jealousy of this woman, whose manner Fred considered so perfect. She looked hesitatingly at her dress, a plain black silk, which, she feared, was perhaps not quite grand enough to see Lady Helena in. Had she been more self-conscious, she would have known that nothing could have set off her graceful figure and transparent skin to better advantage. She was very tall now, and as she threw back her head before she entered the drawing-room by way of asserting to herself her recovered self-possession, her cheek still flushed with excitement, she looked, as she advanced towards her, about the loveliest creature Helena Fortescue had ever seen.

She had thought and listened to Captain Fortescue's praise with much reservation, thinking it was intended to tease and vex her. She was mortified beyond endurance to find it exceeded by the reality, and greeted Mrs. Hallam with the most reserved dignity.

"She had seen Mr. Hallam at the races; had had a good deal of talk with him there, and had thought his wife would like to hear that he seemed to be quite well and enjoying himself extremely. She supposed he had not yet returned?"

More than one of the phrases of this speech annoyed Hester. She had no ready wit to thank Lady Helena for her thoughtfulness, and then turn the conversation to other things. She thought how very handsome she was, but how fierce looking, and that she certainly had a very disagreeable manner. So she said simply, but in her harsh abrupt way, in reply to the last words, "No, I wish he would come home."

Lady Helena could smile now in superior pity, that so fair an outside should be coupled with so plebeian and unformed a manner. "Not a bit of *savoir faire* about her, I see," she said to herself. "A mere child, and I suppose he treats her as one. Where could he have found her?"

"You are not an exacting wife, I hope, Mrs. Hallam?" This was said with a tone and smile that roused Hester's pride, already sufficiently irritated by her morning's meditations, to action. She pressed her lips firmly together, as Helena went on: "I am sure Mr. Hallam will return as soon as he possibly can."

What was her object in irritating Hester, for if she had studied her character for months, she could not probably have taken a surer way. She hardly knew how intense a feeling of dislike and jealousy this girl's loveliness had created within her. Fortescue's words had aroused her curiosity, although, as has been said, she scarcely believed them; and she thought it would be a fair revenge for Hallam's conduct to her at the races, to go and see his wife, whom she felt sure he was ashamed of, and wished to keep hidden; and if she found her, as she expected, a foolish, frightened country girl, she should amuse herself by making a little mischief, and letting her believe he had been very happy away from her.

Hester did not answer. She felt too angry to speak, but merely bowed her head.

"I am surprised," Lady Helena went on, "that you did not accompany him to the races. I assure you I think it is quite a wife's duty to go everywhere with her husband."

Hester raised her head, and looked at her unwaveringly. She did not understand why all this was said, only she felt that it was very insufferable, and must be stopped.

"I suppose," she said, with a calm determination that made the other look in wonder, "that husbands and wives have not always the same ideas about duties."

"Probably not; but, excuse me, I scarcely understand you."

"I mean that what may be your duty in regard to Mr. Fortescue, may not be mine towards my husband."

Lady Helena had never been spoken to so bluntly before in her life; her overbearing haughtiness and imperious temper had always prevented her from hearing the truth, and had Hester been less overwrought, she would have let her words pass without comment, although she might have wondered at their insolence.

Now she saw plainly, by the change in her companion's face, that she had worked some mighty mischief. Her eyes flashed, and she literally trembled with passion—passion, too, which might and must have vent; for who was there to stay its utterance whose opinion was of the slightest value to her, and human opinion was the only self-controlling power Lady Helena's temper obeyed?

"You forget, Mrs. Hallam, that a far larger share of duty is due from you to your husband, than from others, to whom perhaps it is to be regretted you should have ventured to compare yourself."

Hester did not answer, but as Lady Helena rose from her seat, she rose also, as proud, as defiant, and far more self-possessed than her visitor.

They were about the same height, but Lady Helena's form was far more fully developed than Hester's, and there was a velvet-like ease in her movements, which the other as yet wanted. But still scarcely any one could have preferred the dark-browed, Eastern beauty of the one face to the pure, delicate, refined loveliness of the other.

"I don't know what you mean," said Hester, after a pause, feeling insulted and surprised at once: what was intended by this pointed reference to her husband?—"nor do I care to know," she continued, for she thought her visitor looked wicked, and she wished she would go.

"But you must know, I intend you to do so. I never speak in riddles that I cannot explain," said the other, with flashing eyes; "and I want to teach you, what it is a pity your own sense does not, that you should not have compared yourself with me. I was married for myself, not for my money."

Her eyes sparkled triumphantly, as she pronounced the last words with deliberate emphasis.

"How dare you insinuate what you know to be false?" exclaimed Hester, passionately, and she advanced a few steps towards her.

"It is no falsehood—it is the truth," said Helena Fortescue, fixing her eyes steadily on Hester's troubled face, in which she thought she saw the confirmation of her own words. "And now, good morning," she added, sweeping towards the door. "If you do not believe me, ask your husband when he returns,—dare him to contradict my words, and to say he married you because he loved you."

CHAPTER XV.

THE BOLT FALLS.

HESTER could not have told how long she had been standing mute and motionless after Lady Helena's departure. In such a moment she might well question the reality of time, when all that made life real, worth possession to her, seemed gone—crushed out of her heart. She did not try to rouse herself from the dull, blank torpor that appeared to have paralyzed both mind and body; an inward dread of what the awakening would be, kept her still, as if she feared the movement even of a finger might arouse her.

But this could not last, although, as sensation began to return, Hester wished that she could arrest it, that she could in any way end a life that now seemed to her unbearable.

Strange, that with her doubting, incredulous mind, free from any imaginative or impulsive weaknesses, she should at once have received as truth the assertion of a stranger.

Alas! the ground was ready for the seed cast upon it.

But, as the power of thought returned, with a mighty effort of will, she arrested it; she walked deliberately up to the mantel-piece, and looked at the clock; then she rang the bell.

"Parkins, send for a cab, directly."

"Yes, ma'am; anything else, ma'am," said the woman, surprised out of her customary indifference. If her mistress was going to demean herself by riding in a cab, at least, she ought to accompany her; but Mrs. Hallam's stern "No," and injunction not to lose time, were so unlike any words she had ever heard

from her before, that she obeyed in silence, convinced that some serious calamity had happened, and that Lady Helena Fortescue had been its messenger.

Hester was dressed to go out, when the maid tapped at her door.

"I do not want you, Parkins ; you can go."

"There's nothing the matter, ma'am, I hope?" Parkins could no longer restrain herself.

"Nothing : you can go."

But when the cab arrived, she lingered at the door, in the hope of hearing where Mrs. Hallam was bound to ; for, of all things, she thought it most discreditable and improper for her mistress to go out driving alone in a cab so late in the afternoon ; but she was disappointed, Mrs. Hallam only pointed with her finger the direction the man was to take, and then threw herself back, pulling down her veil.

As soon as the cab reached Oxford Street, she let down the front window, and touching the driver's arm, told him the address of Mr. Goldsmith's office. She had once heard her husband say, that the lawyer occasionally remained there till six o'clock, and she had determined to take the chance of finding him, so she sat, as the cab sped rapidly eastward, counting the minutes which still remained to her.

Counting them with her eyes, her mind was counting up other things. As soon as thought had recovered its power, like lightning had come the remembrance of that previous intimacy of her husband's with Goldsmith, under pretext of which he had introduced himself at Kirton's Farm. The lawyer must be able to tell her whether her marriage had been the mockery that woman had asserted it to be. But still she resolutely kept her thoughts from her husband, or his conduct. She was only bent on discovering the truth, and she was counting up all she had ever seen or heard of Goldsmith, and trying to decide whether she could depend on his evidence.

It was a fierce, hard battle : the agony would rise, would plead to be listened to ; but she thrust it back tearlessly, steadily ; she knew if once she let it have its will, her self-mastery would be over, and though the veins in her throat seemed swelling to suffocation, and those on her forehead bound it tightly like knotted ligatures, she kept her sway.

As she left the cab, she met Mr. Goldsmith coming out of his office. He started back in amazement.

"Why, bless my soul, Mrs. Hallam! my dear young lady! who would have thought of seeing you? What is the matter?"

"I can go in, can't I?" She spoke in a quick, determined tone, that showed Goldsmith something serious had happened.

Without answering, he led the way to his private room, and asked her to be seated.

"I am delighted to see you, my dear madam—delighted; but it is by the merest chance you found me. If I had not stayed to answer a letter, that, in the common course of things, should have been left till to-morrow, I fear you would have had a fruitless journey; and now, may I have the pleasure of knowing what has brought you here?"

His usual smile was checked, for Hester had risen from her seat and stood looking at him with an intensity of expression that frightened him. She was very pale, but her eyes were unnaturally bright and restless, and her lips were pressed together so tightly that they looked as colourless as her cheeks.

Still she did not speak; she seemed to be searching the man's soul with that earnest glance, and to be troubled at not finding what she sought, for I have said before Mr. Goldsmith's was not a face calculated to inspire implicit trust.

He felt alarmed, and turned yellower than ever, looking over his shoulder as if he expected to see some one. Had she lost her senses, or what made her stare in that way? her coming to the office alone too; he began to return her earnest gaze; but her first words showed him that she was not insane.

"Mr. Goldsmith, you must excuse me; I know I am acting in a strange unusual manner for so young a woman; but when you have heard me, you will say I am justified in my conduct."

He began to deprecate any such idea, using his white handkerchief and smiling; but she bent her head gravely and went on: "I want to know, Mr. Goldsmith—and I charge you to answer me truly, by the memory of my father, who I believe was a good friend to you,"—Goldsmith shivered slightly under her earnest words—"whether you had ever mentioned me to—to Mr. Hallam as a *suitable* wife, before he came the first time to Kirton's Farm?"

He could not help changing countenance a little.

"My dear young lady, what is the drift of this question? it involves so much. You must excuse me, but I must know what you are aiming at before I can answer you in any way satisfactorily."

Hester looked at him scornfully.

"If I only want the truth, I cannot see why the end signifies."

"Ah, so like a woman!" The lawyer rubbed his hands, and then buried his face in his pocket-handkerchief. "You must excuse me, Mrs. Hallam"—Hester shrank from the sound of her own name—"if I say I can hardly take upon me to recollect all I may, or may not, have then said to my young friend in reference to so very charming a person as yourself."

She walked straight up to him and held him by the arm with a firm grasp, as if she feared he would slip away from her and leave her question unanswered.

"You are not answering my meaning, sir. You know what I want you to tell me about, as well as I do. Now, Mr. Goldsmith, look at me; I am young and ignorant and friendless, but I have a strong will, and I never yet formed a set purpose that I have not accomplished, so far as it depended on myself: if I understand my father's will rightly, I shall depend wholly on myself after I am of age?"

"Precisely so, my dear young lady—subject always to my counsels, which I feel convinced you are too sensible ever to require. I begin to see daylight," he continued to himself; "some money trouble in which that precious spendthrift has involved her already—poor thing, poor thing!—and she's tired of him." He smiled to himself as if the idea were not unwelcome.

"Well, then, it will of course be in my power to continue to employ you in the management of my affairs or not, as I may think fit." He tried hard to interrupt her, but she would not hear him. "Now, Mr. Goldsmith listen to me. For my father's sake and for my own I wish to trust you implicitly, but this must rest entirely on your truth to me. I tell you plainly you must choose between me and—and"—her voice slightly faltered—"my husband in this matter; you cannot, from what I have been told, keep faith with both to-day—"

"What have you been told, and who by?" interrupted the lawyer, as the remembrance of the little agreement he had drawn up for Mr. Hallam and which he had never seen destroyed, flashed across his mind.

"Never mind what I have been told, or who has told me; you are only losing time, Mr. Goldsmith. I thought you would have understood that I was in earnest when I said I had a strong will." She looked so sternly at him that he absolutely felt afraid of flinching from her steady gaze. "Once again I ask you, in the

plainest words I can use—did Mr. Hallam marry me because he loved me, or was it a plot, a pre-arranged plan, because he needed money, and knew that I should be rich ? ”

Goldsmith stood speechless, uncertain how to act ; he could not force himself to answer truthfully, he did not dare to tell her a falsehood in her present mood.

“ I will make it still easier for you,” she said, his silence strengthening her certainty of the worst ; her blood seemed turning to ice, and her heart felt leaden. “ If my father had suspected my attachment and refused his consent to our marriage, left his money away from me, would Frederic Hallam have married me then ? ”

She spoke firmly, but so dispassionately, so unlike a woman, that it was impossible she was speaking of any one she loved. It might have been, for anything there was of emotion in her manner, of some one she had never seen.

Still Goldsmith’s habitual caution made him hesitate.

“ But will you not tell me so much as this,” he said, after having rapidly calculated which side it would be the best policy to take in this dispute—“ what end are you aiming at ? You cannot get a separation from your husband on such a ground as this.”

“ I am not thinking of it,” said Hester, sadly—oh, so sadly ! her sternness could scarcely be maintained, now that each moment she felt more and more convinced of the truth of the accusation. “ Once more—will you or will you not help your old friend’s child ? I am not judging you hardly, you are Mr. Hallam’s friend, and I respect you for trying to defend him. But you are my guardian, and therefore should in this matter take a father’s part towards me. Oh, sir ! ” she continued, passionately, clasping her hands as the intense emotion, so long subdued, found vent in words, “ do not mind my hardness—I could not help it—but tell me—tell a woman whose heart will not bear this fearful doubt any longer ; tell me, I entreat—I implore you—if I have good reason for my fear.”

“ You have,” he said, carried out of himself, by her impassioned manner, too strongly to wear his usual precautionary mask ; “ but,” he added, as he saw the colour, which had risen with agitation, fade to ashy whiteness, while her whole frame quivered as if struck, “ who is to say that warm affection has not, or at any rate may not, replace the former feeling ? ”

“ Hush ! ” she said, quietly ; “ no more words now ; you might have spared me some before, Mr. Goldsmith.”

She turned to leave the office slowly and heavily.

"You will allow me to discharge your cab, and to take you home. We shall find my carriage waiting by this time."

She only shook her head, but when he repeated his offer, the stern look returned, and he dared not insist, although he felt unwilling to let her depart alone.

"How strange in one so young!" he thought, as he seated himself in his brougham; "I must be careful; she requires no common management."

He need not have feared how she would get home; Hester was neither faint nor hysterical when she reached Gloucester Place.

It was dinner-time, and she came downstairs, and went through the formal mockery, as if no blight had fallen on the flowers of her young life's happiness, as if she were still the same girl she had risen in the morning. But then she gave orders that she was not to be disturbed again—she required nothing more; and the words were uttered in a stern strange tone of command, that made the servants wonder at the change that had come over the young lady.

A change indeed. She felt stunned; she had no tears to loosen and carry off the oppression that clung about her heart and brain, as if to suffocate her. She could only think—think—think.

Strangely distinct among all that had happened since, stood out in memory the day of her father's death; this seemed so like it. She had sat then motionless beside him, wondering sometimes if it were a nightmare-like dream, and if it would not soon be over. She had never known either, how dearly she had loved her father till she lost him, and now she felt too she had not known before how dearly she had loved the man she thought her husband was. There was a dreadful justice in her character—justice untempered with mercy—and she knew it. She would have given much now to be only a gentle, loving, forgiving woman, but it was impossible; and she was far too real to give way to vain longings for what might not be.

She looked upon what had happened as a punishment sent to her, for what she had often thought of—the readiness with which she had listened to Frederic Hallam, so soon after her father's death. How soon she had forgotten her grief in his society! Not once had she troubled herself to think whether he was the son-in-law her father would have chosen, although—and she started now

as, in the intensity of her retrospection, the thought was forced upon her—she remembered how abruptly and decidedly he had checked all inquiries concerning him, after his first visit to Kirton's Farm. At last tears came stealing down, as she thought that, in that iron nature of her father's, which had seemed to repel human love and sympathy, there had, at any rate, been truth and honesty, for had he ever owed any man anything? "How far more precious than mere alluring outward show!" thought Hester, and her tears ceased suddenly, as the picture of what she now considered her husband rose before her.

She had just been pitilessly severe to herself, for she really had been deeply saddened by her father's death. But with the usual error of singularly just natures, she was hard in her judgments, would not admit excuses; and her husband's crime, as she called it, seemed to her unpardonable. The Frederic that she had loved, that she still loved, was not her husband. She could see the two characters side by side, and as circumstance after circumstance—noted, although till now without full comprehension—uncoiled from memory's inner recesses, she decided that the one she had worshipped had been but a fair mask—a brightly painted seeming of the corruption within. She was married to a man who could both speak and act a falsehood—who still regarded her, not as a wife to be loved and honoured, but as a means of raising money for his self-indulgent extravagance. And then her future life spread itself out before her, and she asked herself, gravely and firmly, if she could pass it with such a man as she had just been contemplating. The answer did not come readily. Once she thought—it was love's last effort, before the gates were finally barred against him—that when she saw her husband, old feelings might return. He might—and here was a ray in the darkness—yet learn to love her; but the withering scorn that sprang up against herself, for such worse than childish weakness, stifled the hope even in its birth.

"Have I not appealed to his love and his truth, and has he not lied to me?" was the stern answer she made herself.

But resolve seemed difficult. She could harden herself against him; still no definite answer would come as to how she must act. She sought no comfort, no guidance, but in herself; self-contained, self-reliant, hour after hour she sat; not worried or doubting, but confident, when these brain-clouds of weakness and emotion should have passed, that she should see her way clear before her. . . .

Here was a resolve at last, and a refreshing thankfulness cooled her fevered brain as it came. She would think no more to-night. She would go to bed and sleep; in the morning her brain would be clearer, and her mind more calm.

But although the will may be and is almost omnipotent in such natures as Hester's, it is not quite so. She tried to sleep, and at first sank into what seemed likely to be unbroken slumber. But it did not last—she started into sudden wakefulness. In a moment sleep seemed to have left her. All her lost hopes—all the sorrow for the happiness she had fancied her own in her husband's love—concentrated in a sudden speechless, tearless agony. If she could only die—and she thought she must, for surely this was the pain of heart-breaking she had heard of—and then she searched back into memory, clung as a drowning wretch might for refuge from this pain; but all aid seemed futile and helpless, when she tried to grasp it, as straws floating along the river. Like a poor drowning wretch, I said. Hester was in far worse plight, as yet she was more like a grand old heathen, in her blind self-reliance, than a baptized Christian.

She felt she was hopeless—friendless; so she seemed to be, as far as regarded human sympathy, and she sought for no higher love or help.

For a moment she thought of Lucy. Should she go to her? But how could she reveal to any of her own relations that her grand marriage had been a mockery and a falsehood from beginning to end? And, besides, the thought of Lucy and Jacob, and their happiness, was a fresh agony. Ah! how much happier to have been as poor as her cousin, then perhaps some one would have loved her for herself, some one—who—were not all men the same? Jacob seemed to make Lucy happy now, but who could tell what the end might be? Perhaps it might be better that *her* trial had come so soon; the longer it had gone on, the harder it would have seemed to endure. Now she had said good-by to Love for ever, and yet, deep down in her heart—almost unknown to herself—lurked a desperate hope that it might not be true; that something in her husband's face, when he returned, would tell her he had married her because he loved her.

So the night slowly wore away—a night of agony sufficient to change a young blooming girl into a hard, determined woman.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. GOLDSMITH'S MEDITATIONS.

FREDERIC HALLAM did not stand long bending his eyes on the flying horses.

In a few moments his fate was decided, and he knew all was lost. But after the first severe mortification at his want of luck or skill, which seemed to affect him quite as much as the actual loss of money, his fertile brain, over-excited by the day's events, began to plan some mode of extrication from his embarrassments. The first thing to be done was to write to Goldsmith, and tell him plainly that unless he supplied him more liberally, he should raise money elsewhere on his wife's property;—and then he was far too exhausted to go on thinking, and at Tatton there was plenty of amusement to be found for those who sought to get rid of importunate care.

Sooner than he expected on the second day, he received Goldsmith's letter.

The lawyer expressed his extreme regret at his being again in want of money, but intimated that it would be in every way desirable that he should once more apply to him before he carried his threat into execution.

Looking at Hallam's face as he read this letter, any one would have thought his cares at an end.

"I've brought the old Jew to his senses, have I, at last," he said, joyfully; "now I'll just make him settle this little business and double our income as well; that will enable me to live comfortably, and also to refund the interest to Hester's account. I begin to see Goldsmith was a much cleverer fellow than I took him for, when he tied the money so tightly on her; he said it was for my sake, because he saw I should always be careless with money, and, therefore, whatever scrapes I got into, I should always be secure. After all, what's hers is really mine; poor little thing, I believe she'd sign her soul away to please me. I wish she were different, a little more child-like and lively;" (he forgot his last rebuke) "but she's growing such a woman, that perhaps by the time she really is of age, I may find her less easy to manage; however, there's no time to lose now."

He was soon on the road to London, and, sending his man home with his luggage, took his way straight to Goldsmith's office.

It was still early, and the lawyer had been seated in deep thought ever since he reached his office—thought of an unusual kind, too.

Hester had made a far deeper impression than she was aware of on the subtle schemer, who, both by nature and profession, was accustomed to harden himself against emotion. But he could yield to its appeal in this case without any betrayal of weakness. Hester was his client, *par excellence*; his interests were bound up in hers far more closely than she knew of, and although it would have been more congenial to him to have persisted in an evasive reply on the previous evening, yet for once the truth served his purpose better than any double dealing. And yet he did not feel easy. Her words, “your dead friend’s child,” haunted him, and he seemed to see her grief-stricken eyes wherever he turned. He had always thought her cold and childish; but had he and Hallam both been mistaken, and did she love her husband like any other fond, foolish woman, after all? If she did, what an agony of mortification and despair he must have inflicted on her; for Mr. Goldsmith had seen a good deal of women in his time, and knew what depths of grief they were capable of.

Hester’s face would haunt him this morning, not for its own sake only; it carried him back long ago, to the village where he and Ralph Kirton had both been born—to a quiet seat in the churchyard under a broadly spreading yew-tree—a young girl, almost as fair, although more rustic looking than Hester, sat there, her head on the shoulder of a youth about to seek his fortunes in London; how sad her blue eyes were, how full of coming sorrow, when she said, “Don’t forget me, Godfrey; oh, don’t forget me, or my heart will break!” He remembered he had kissed her and vowed eternal truth and constancy; but even then his heart had been more full of his future than of her present—and what had happened? His future had become a present brighter than he could have pictured; she was of the past now, for he had soon forgotten her, her heart had broken—and she was at rest.

He sat now, wondering if this grief would prove as fatal to Hester. He felt uneasy and restless, he wished he could get her out of his head—that calm self-controlled grief, for her eyes told him it was grief, had moved him far more deeply than any passionate outburst.

It was strange that he should have felt so uneasy, when he must have known how much his meditation might have still availed between Hester and her husband. Who shall say that it was not

that very knowledge that made him uneasy? Was he really so very anxious to see his friend's child happy in her married life? The unusual emotion which seemed to be mastering him this morning, answered "Yes;" but when he considered her position fully in relation to himself, he found so much weighty argument on the other side, that his restlessness returned strongly, and he started up and paced his office.

No man, even of Mr. Goldsmith's type, makes up his mind to a downward step without a struggle. But where feeling *only* has to fight the battle against self-interest, the strife will not be very long, nor its issue doubtful.

He had just turned his attention to some matters of business, when a clerk came to say Mr. Hallam was below, and wished to see him.

"Ask him to come upstairs."

He took one more restless walk across his room, and then stood facing the door to await his visitor.

Frederic Hallam looked far more radiant, more like himself, than the last time he had visited his wife's guardian.

But Mr. Goldsmith did not allow him to begin the conversation.

His face seemed to have elongated, and to have become suddenly jaundiced, as the door opened to admit his visitor, and his voice expressed deep commiseration, not unmingled with reproof, as he deplored Hallam's ill-fortune at the races.

"Well, never mind," said Hallam, cheerfully; "better luck next time; but it makes plain to you, I should think, that I was right when I told you, you cut our means of living too close; honestly, Goldsmith, you will save yourself and me a good deal of trouble and annoyance, if you just double the figure at once."

"My dear sir!" exclaimed the lawyer, hands and chin both expressing his surprise, "I hoped these losses would have sobered you down, brought you into bounds, but you are worse than ever. Dear me, dear me! now I wonder," he continued, looking furtively at Hallam, "what my charming ward would say to this little proposition of yours; but, of course, it has been mentioned between you."

Hallam laughed.

"Now, Goldsmith, you are too absurd; in the first place, I've not seen Hester since I went to Tatton, and in the next, is it likely I should talk business to her? Why, what on earth can she know about it?"

A strange light gleamed in the lawyer's eyes when Hallam said he had not seen his wife ; he paused for a few moments before he replied : " And yet, my dear sir, Mrs. Hallam must be called on to understand business, and before very long, too, nor do I think you will find her unapt. You are aware that, after she comes of age, her signature will be absolutely necessary in any little business matters."

The excitement of his rapid journey, and the relief Goldsmith's letter had given him, had thrown Hallam off his guard ; but now there was something in the lawyer's look and tone that struck him as hostile. When he spoke again, it was in a far more guarded tone.

" You said you wished me to come to you, so I imagine you have some proposition to make ; but mind you, Goldsmith, I must square these Tatton matters off-hand."

The lawyer shook his head mournfully.

" You must allow me to remonstrate with you, Mr. Hallam, indeed you must," the words sounded humble, but the tone was insolent. " Dear me, dear me ! if my poor old friend could but see how the fine fortune he built up is being gambled away without any benefit, that I can see, accruing to his daughter, surely he would not rest in his grave."

Hallam chafed, but still he kept his temper.

" Stay a moment, Goldsmith : did you exact any promise from me, when I married your friend's daughter, against betting, or did you not rather recommend a rich marriage to me as a safe means of indulging in such amusements ? But, now, I didn't come here to recriminate : you may make your mind easy about me ; I don't mind saying I've had a smart lesson this time, and I dare say I shall be more careful ; but it would be much better to tempt me to be prudent, and this you might do, by doubling our income at once."

The lawyer looked at him as if he thought he had taken leave of his senses, but Hallam went on before he could interrupt.

" Yes, I should certainly learn to economize, because I greatly desire to pay regular interest for the money with which you are now going to settle those debts ; perhaps in time I may be able to replace the whole sum. I think it will be a far better plan to have it advanced to me at once, than to be constantly troubling you with money transactions."

Mr. Goldsmith stroked his chin meditatively with his thumb and his two first fingers.

"You are speaking, I presume, of your wife's fortune," he said, slowly. "Well, it would, as you say, save trouble—always supposing Mrs. Hallam's consent attainable to such an arrangement."

"I will answer for that," said the young man, haughtily; "but at present I believe the increase of income rests mainly with you. And I am quite as anxious to get one point settled as the other."

"Well, now," said Goldsmith, still reflectively, as he lounged back in his easy chair; "I always prefer settling one thing at a time. How is this matter to be settled; will you drop me a line, to say when I can wait on Mrs. Hallam; or how shall it be?"

"Oh, there is no occasion to worry Hester too much with business before her time," said Hallam, smiling. "She will do all I want, so don't tease her beforehand. You just draw up what's necessary, and send it, and I'll see that she signs it."

"Her signature is not required at present, although I prefer consulting her on so important a matter. You must excuse me, my dear sir, if I appear somewhat formal. It is the first time I have been called on to take such serious steps in behalf of my fair client, and I should wish to have an interview with her before I come to any decision. I am sure Mrs. Hallam will expect it of me."

Hallam looked hard at him—what did he mean?—it would be a nice thing for him to begin to meddle between husband and wife, and yet he was too quick not to see that it would not do to quarrel with him.

"Suppose you dine with us this evening; won't that do?" he said, carelessly, as if not choosing to see the doubt of him the lawyer's words had implied.

"Thank you! no; I always prefer to settle these little things in the morning. Shall we say to-morrow morning, at any time most convenient to Mrs. Hallam, or ——"

"Very well; I'll send you a note in the course of the day; but let me have this clear: directly you hand me over what I have asked you for, you will take into consideration the other plan, which is really quite as important. You can't fancy what a thing it is, or how absurd it makes a man look, to be always hard up, and yet to feel he has a right to be spending thousands. By Jove! it's not the thing at all."

Mr. Goldsmith shook his head and sighed; he was in a

dolorous mood this morning, from which Fred could not rouse him.

"Such a sum," he murmured; "really, I assure you, my dear sir, I had to read your letter twice before I could believe you could have incurred such a venture. But you said just now, you expected I had a proposition to make you; and so I have. If Mrs. Hallam is so indulgent to your extravagance, as to consent to your having the means of paying for it at once—so much the better, no doubt—although, as I said before, it grieves me to the very soul to see my old friend's fortune made ducks and drakes of. But in making this proposition to Mrs. Hallam, you must be very careful—very careful, and must remember that you are altogether dependent on her generosity for anything besides the annual payment made you out of the property."

Hallam bit his lips, and thought, "Insolent Jew, my day will come;" but his power of self-control kept him outwardly calm.

"Not much fear of my forgetting it, all things considered," he said, bitterly; "spite of all your plausible reasons, I consider it was a mistake to make a man dependent on his wife," and he rose to go.

"A moment more; you seem to forget that you will very soon be of age, according to the peculiar provisions of your father's will, and that in due time you must inherit both from your respected mother, Mrs. Hallam senior, and from your aunt: would not that suffice?"

Hallam shrugged his shoulders; he did not choose to tell Goldsmith that the greater part of his father's inheritance had been anticipated long ago. But the lawyer, who guessed as much, went on, unheeding him.

"Your notions, doubtless, may have influenced your wife's; but, carefully as she has been brought up, I apprehend that the mere mention of such a sum as you require will shock and grieve her beyond measure." He paused, and, from the shelter of his handkerchief, looked sideways at the young man, and, seeing an impatient gesture, he went on: "Taking this into due consideration, my proposition would be that *you* do not mention the matter at all to her, but allow me gently to arrange it for you, when I see Mrs. Hallam."

Frederic Hallam, throughout their interview, had not been insensible to the change in the lawyer's manner; he had been too worldly-wise to resent it hitherto, but this was more than he could bear, as the lawyer intended it to be.

"You are very kind and considerate, Mr. Goldsmith ; but I see you don't quite, as a single man, comprehend the terms on which husbands and wives live together ; as I told you before, I think your preliminary meeting with my wife wholly unnecessary ; she will, of course, do all I wish in this matter. And now I won't make any further trespass on your valuable time."

And with a hurried leave-taking he departed.

Mr. Goldsmith looked after his visitor as he closed the door with a peculiar and very unpleasant smile, slowly rubbing his chin the while, and decided, in his own mind, that his dear young friend had become far less sharp-witted since his marriage.

CHAPTER XVII.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

FREDERIC HALLAM walked along towards his home, irritable and excited, and very much dissatisfied with himself for being so.

But for Goldsmith's words, he would have considered it the most natural thing in the world to ask Hester's consent to any arrangement in his favour ; he did not feel under any obligation to her, it was all the other way. What sacrifice had she made in marrying him ? However, it was absurd to be annoyed about it. Goldsmith meant nothing ; he was an old prig, and liked to show his power ; still there had been a very unpleasant look in his face several times during the interview ; perhaps it was natural he should be reluctant to emancipate any one from his clutches, for Fred vowed to himself, if only his income were doubled, he would take good care to live within it : all else apart, he began to feel ashamed of having, as Goldsmith said, "made ducks and drakes of so much money."

After all, he owed him a mere trifle now. The ready money paid down to his account at the time of his marriage, had been nearly all devoted to liquidating the lawyer's claims upon him. The young man thought of this as he walked along.

"He got a great deal more by my marriage than I did," he said to himself.

He seemed to prefer walking this morning ; it seemed to give him more time to think. Of course, nothing that Goldsmith had said could give him any real hesitation in speaking to Hester

about money matters, and yet he evidently was not impatient to reach Gloucester Place. He had returned a day sooner than the time named in his letter. Hester would be surprised to see him; he hoped she would not make a scene by rushing out to the street-door, or anything of that kind. She meant it all for the best, but it was a silly thing to do; if it were not for this worry about the money, he should be rather pleased to see her again, poor little thing!

Meditating in this discursive fashion, he arrived at home.

Parkins was coming downstairs as the street-door was opened.

She started to see her master.

"We did not expect you till to-morrow, sir."

"Ah, no; I suppose not; how is your mistress?"

"Not very well, I think, sir; at least she don't look well. I'm glad you've come home, sir."

And the discreet damsel threw open the door of the dining-room.

"Not here? then I suppose my mistress is upstairs in the drawing-room."

"No, never mind, I'll find her; your mistress won't be frightened; it's better than coming home a day too late, you know, Parkins," he said, smiling; and he walked upstairs alone.

Hester was sitting in the drawing-room. She rose as he entered, but she looked self-possessed, evidently not frightened nor surprised. In some mysterious way, we generally are warned of our approaching fate. I do not mean that there is any visible token, but whether it be that the previous expectation has so wrought on our nervous system as to render its perceptions unnaturally acute, or that there is a mysterious sympathy between persons, which makes each cognisant of the approach of the other, it is certain that Hester had sat expecting her husband for the last two hours.

With the natural contradiction of human nature, he felt disappointed that she was not surprised. But her great beauty struck him unusually. She had more colour than he was accustomed to see her with; for she had flushed deeply as he entered, and as she still stood after his greeting, he thought she certainly was quite as dignified in appearance as Lady Helena, although her movements might be less graceful. And he could not help feeling proud of her. Her first words dispelled the charm; they were so harshly uttered. She had schooled herself to be calm and just.

"Are you hungry? Did you breakfast very early?"

"Yes, perhaps I might as well have a glass of sherry and a biscuit. I can have it here, you know; I never eat luncheon."

He threw himself comfortably into an easy-chair, and thought, as his wife walked to the bell, that she would in time be a very fine woman, and do him credit. But she certainly was the most silent, undemonstrative creature he had ever met with. Still that was a fault quite on the right side.

"Well, how have you been, Hester, while I was away—all right? Fortescue gave you my message—has any one else been?"

"Captain Fortescue called one evening," she turned very pale again now, "and yesterday Lady Helena Fortescue called also."

"What on earth"—began Hallam, impatiently; and then noticing his wife's earnest look, he said, "You didn't see her, did you?"

"Yes, I saw her, and talked to her."

"Not much, I should fancy,"—his wife's sententious manner annoyed him. "You don't seem particularly glad to see me, Hester."

"I am very glad you are come."

"I declare," he said, with one of his sweet smiles, "you have grown more cut and dried than ever, while I have been away. I must not leave you alone so long again, must I, little woman? You've got quite moped."

The soft colour flitted over her cheek once more, and her eyes looked softly into his.

"Now, where would you like to go this afternoon?" he continued. "I've only got a tiresome note to write to old Goldsmith, and then I'll do exactly what you like, the rest of the day."

Her heart gave a joyful leap, and her lips dimpled into a trustful smile as he spoke; but Goldsmith's name made her compress them tightly again.

Hallam did not see the change; he went straight on, without looking at her.

"By-the-by, I'm in want of rather a large sum just now; I've had ill-luck at Tatton—it's a bore, for I stood to win immensely—and Goldsmith thinks the best way is to take it out of what is coming to us, you know."

She looked hard and stern enough now, and the colour faded entirely, but until she spoke he did not raise his eyes; then the

change struck him. What had happened? she had grown ten years older in his absence.

"Is this Mr. Goldsmith's own plan?"

"We both thought well of it."

"Then why is it mentioned to me?"

"Because of some legal nonsense or other, which requires your consent; just a form, you understand?"

"Only a form—yes, I want to understand exactly; if I refuse, you cannot have the money; is that what you mean?"

Indolent as Frederic Hallam felt after his hurried journey, he started to his feet in sheer astonishment. That a girl, a mere child in matters of business, should at once have seen the only part of the transaction he wished her to be ignorant of completely puzzled him. What could have put such an idea in her head?

"You're joking now," he said. "I told Goldsmith I would find out from you what you wished, and when you would see him, so that no time might be lost. Shall I say to-morrow morning, at ten o'clock?"

Her remark had annoyed him, and he did not make this request quite so courteously as he otherwise would have done.

"I wish to speak to Mr. Goldsmith alone, before I consent to anything," said Hester, gravely.

He looked vexed now.

"How absurd, Hester! What is the use of making all this fuss? Don't you understand that this is a debt of honour which must be paid as soon as possible? You don't suppose I should wish to spend our money unnecessarily; however, as you seem to wish to become a woman of business, I can explain the matter to you as well as Goldsmith can."

He threw himself into his chair again, and turned towards her. She had grown paler than he had ever seen her, but she did not seem faint, only as if her face were chiselled in marble.

"Why, what is the matter with you, Hester? are you ill? you're as white as a sheet."

"I'm not ill," she said, "but I want to say a few serious words to you. I prefer hearing these business matters you speak of from Mr. Goldsmith, and as the money you want is mine, I think my wish in this matter should be studied."

He could not bear it; he forgot all prudence, all forbearance. It had never entered into his calculations that Hester could consider her interests separate from his, and he told her so, adding that he thought she ought to remember all he had sacrificed

in marrying her, and try at least to be a dutiful, yielding wife on a point where their interests must be mutual, and that she should not talk at random on subjects about which she could know nothing.

"I am not talking at random," she said, so slowly, so calmly that it quieted him in a moment. "I have had time for thought during my lonely hours lately, Frederic Hallam. I am no longer a child, and I have been trying to learn the true relations that ought to exist between husband and wife. In yours towards me," and her lips quivered with the passionate scorn she could no longer suppress, "there has been falsehood from beginning to end."

CHAPTER XVIII.

FREDERICK HALLAM PAYS HIS DEBTS.

AN hour had passed, and still Mr. Hallam remained in the drawing-room.

Parkins's curiosity and excitement had been roused to a most unusual point—to a point which had by this time carried her to the landing by the staircase window.

At first, as she stood in the hall beneath, she heard Mrs. Hallam speaking in indignant, earnest tones, and then the husband's voice seemed to break in angrily, but she was called down to dinner at this juncture, and, for the time, her curiosity subsided. But when she came upstairs again, all sound had ceased. There was dead silence in the upper part of the house.

Perhaps they had parted; perhaps her master had come down into the dining-room; she knew he had not gone out, for she had not heard the street-door close. She stood for a moment, and, while she hesitated, came the sharp, quick tread, followed by the ring of the postman, and the click of the letter-box.

Here was what she wanted: an excuse for going into the dining-room. But it was empty, and she saw that the letter was only a pamphlet open at each end.

She dared not venture into the drawing-room to disturb her mistress in her present mood about a trifle like this, and again she asked herself whatever could have happened to make Mrs. Hallam look and speak as she had done since Lady Helena Fortescue's visit,

But again there were voices upstairs, and, as I have said, Parkins followed their sound.

They were not speaking loud now. Mr. Hallam seemed to be giving short, sullen answers to what his wife was saying; but they evidently had both resumed self-control, and did not wish to be overheard; all was confused murmur, except the different tones of the speakers.

Parkins felt desperate. It had been a risk, knowing, as she did, Hester's sudden, rapid movements, to venture upstairs at all; but as the boy who climbs the orchard wall for one apple, seldom returns without filling all his pockets, so, having braved one risk, she determined to go close to the drawing-room door, and try if the sounds were more audible. But before she reached it, there was a sudden pause and movement within; she hesitated, and well for her that she did so.

Hester's voice, in loud, distinct tones, said: "On those terms, and those only, I consent to remain with you as your wife; when you have decided, I will write to Mr. Goldsmith."

The next moment the door opened, and she stood close to Parkins, who affected to be coming upstairs, with the letter in her hand.

Hester's face was deeply flushed, her lips scarcely visible, so tightly were they pressed together. She started, and looked severely at the woman, who, in positive fear, forgot that the paper was addressed to Mr. Hallam, and put it into Hester's hand.

"This is for your master; he is in the drawing-room;" and she had passed up to her bedroom before Parkins recovered from her flutter of terror. Had she been less frightened, she must have been struck by the strange change that had passed over Mrs. Hallam.

Still, she was anxious to see her master. "What had he been doing, and how could Mrs. Hallam venture to speak in such a way as that to her lawful husband?"

Frederic Hallam did not turn round when the door was opened. He was standing in the farthest window of the back room; his forehead pressed against the sill, and both hands clasped behind him. Parkins could not see his face, but the attitude in which he stood, with bent head and shoulders, half crouched, as if all manhood had been crushed out of him, touched her.

There was something in his manner and temperament that had always made him popular with inferiors. Parkins felt quite sure,

whoever was to blame, it was not Mr. Hallam, and without trying to disturb him, she laid the letter on the table, and left the room more gently than she had entered it.

She was not one of the gossiping class of servants ; she was rather one of those who observe and note accurately and silently all that happens among their employers, and she had sense enough to feel this matter was too serious to be talked about, either to Martin or the servants of the house ; but she saw some change was impending, and watched anxiously to see how all would end.

There was much coming and going for several days ; letters and messages from and to Mr. Goldsmith's office, and, finally, came that gentleman himself.

But he had only a short interview with Mrs. Hallam, and although he came late—after six o'clock—he was not asked to stay dinner.

The next morning, Mrs. Hallam summoned Parkins, and asked if she objected to a country life, supposing that her wages were considerably increased.

The woman hesitated ; she feared Mrs. Hallam now ; but there was something in the whole story that interested and fascinated her ; she felt as if she must see it to the end, so she said she had no wish to leave.

And in a week's time it was known at his club, that before the season was over, Frederic Hallam had either purchased or rented an estate about eighty miles from London, and that he had gone there with his wife—gone there, it was said, without communicating his intentions to any one.

Some said it was all a myth, that he had had serious losses on the turf, and had slipped off quietly to the Continent ; others contradicted this, and declared positively that he had paid his debts. While others—and this tale began in Lady Helena's morning-room—said that he was heartily ashamed of his awkward wife, and had really buried himself alive with her in this country-house ; and these prophesied that next season he would reappear among them as free a man as ever, having left Mrs. Hallam to cultivate cabbages.

Book the Third.

UPLANDS.



CHAPTER I.

FATHER AND CHILD.

IT was a bright spring morning, not that early time when we almost wonder how the rash young leaves can venture to cast off their scaly covering, and bare themselves to nipping winds by day and cruel night frosts, but genial warmth, in which even a few early brimstone butterflies disported themselves among the blackberry bushes on each side of the stately old high road. Just at this point, it was picturesque as well as stately. It had been ascending gradually for nearly half-a-mile, and now, the hill having become too steep for it to keep pace with, it took its way, or, rather, a way had been cut for it, through the top of the hill, so that lofty, almost perpendicular, banks of bright yellow earth rose on each side, crowned with thick pine woods. Except just at that time of year and day, when the sun over-topped the tall trees, the road lay in deep shadow—a quiet valley, up whose sides clambered the aforesaid brambles, tangled with sloe-bushes, on some of which rampant ivy had established round tree-tops, glittering with mingled light and shadow.

Wild flowers were scanty. A few steps farther, after passing the crest of the hill, the road opened suddenly on the left; a tall, white hand-post, standing on a triangular piece of turf, protruded like a tongue from the green wood path, telling travellers of divers tempting villages behind and before them, while a shorter limb, pointing into the pine wood itself, bore on it the simple inscription, “To Uplands.”

The green path led through the heart of the wood; there were bye-paths in plenty, but they wound and twisted themselves out of sight in too alluring a manner to entice any experienced traveller to pursue their meanderings, lest they might prove as

bewilderingly delightful as Hamadryads ; only an ardent lover of flowers could not have resisted straying from the path, now that the pines were replaced by noble English forest trees, occasional glimpses of open space between the spreading roots of beeches, whose leaves had scarcely unfolded their silken verdure, revealing patches of deep green feathered foliage, crowned with the lovely trembling blossoms of wood anemone, or closer nestling almost into its mother earth, the delicate wood sorrel, with its exquisite three-fold leaf and scarlet stem. Violets, too, were abundant in the wood, and blue-bells, and primroses, and, in grand masses, sitting queen-like on its handsome, spreading leaves, the snowy-flowered garlic. But, after a while, the brambles grew closer and closer to the path, and the trees met nearer over-head, although, from the lessening of the green gloom in front it was plain the wood was ending.

At length, the path turned suddenly to the right, and stopped at a white gate, on the other side of which was Uplands itself—a noble park, well planted with stately trees, grouped with no common skill. A winding path led up and down the many undulations to a point where the trees stood more closely together, and were yet more vividly contrasted in foliage. Spring was still in the glory of its fresh livery : the tender green of the elms and limes looking yet brighter beside the broad leaves of Spanish chestnut and gloomy Italian pines. Through the verdure of these closely-grouped trees appeared at intervals the Tudor gables and twisted chimneys of the house itself. Leaving the path, and walking close up to the trees on the left, might be seen, through the spaces between their trunks, the comparatively modern frontage of a comfortable family mansion ; a broad-grassed ditch surmounted by an iron chevaux-de-frise divided the lawn from the park. Such a lawn ! not cut up into fancifully-devised flower-beds, but a broad, smooth expanse of turf, the monotony relieved by huge baskets here and there formed of the subverted roots and part of the trunks of what must have been majestic beech trees, their twisted, picturesque wreathing filled with scarlet and white and golden tulips, making quite an eastern blaze of colour. Returning to the guidance of the footpath, it led through a large, swinging gate, parallel with the right-hand angle of the house to the entrance-gate—fronted by a broad, grassy level, sloping down from which, and extending a considerable distance to the park gates, was a noble avenue of Spanish chestnut trees—the principal entrance to Uplands.

The house was far more picturesque on this side, evidently built in the early days of James I., with irregular gables, projecting oriels, and quaint chimney stacks. There was a charming old-fashioned English garden here, separated by a low red brick wall from the broad ditch into which the grassy trench changed as soon as it had reached the entrance-gate—probably the remains of the moat of former times—for Uplands boasted a more remote antiquity than any brick and mortar evidence about it would have substantiated. Beyond this side of the house, but adjoining it, were the out-buildings and stable-yard; a high irregular pile, evidently the most ancient part of the building, surmounted by a clock-turret, the grotesque old face of which was rendered almost indistinct by a quaint Latin inscription.

The stable-yard, seen through the open-arched entrance, lay in deep shadow, throwing by its relief, a still more vivid brightness on the low wall, which turning at right angles at the entrance, made a parapet to the bridge over the ditch. The wall had been, and was still in some places, red brick, but patches of grey lichen had crept over it, which the sun's intense heat had changed into gold and brown. Here and there were tufts of dark green moss in full blossom; wall-flowers nodded on the top, or peeped out among the crannies, while an overgrowth of snap-dragon not yet in flower, and trailing dog-rose and bramble, gave token what a study of colour the old wall would be, when the year had grown a little older.

Turning from the sun-blaze of colour, to refresh the eyes in the cool arched shadow, there stood in it now,—a picture literally framed in by the rugged brickwork in front, to which the quaint stable buildings formed a fitting background—a gentleman, holding a little child by the hand. The gentleman was singularly handsome, but the intense, all-engrossing devotion with which he was bending over the child, arrested the eye more than his own striking appearance. The little boy, who seemed to be between two and three years old, was evidently trying to explain something about the great blood-hound standing beside him. His fearless attitude, one delicate hand laid firmly on the creature's head, while, pointing eagerly with the other, he was asking some questions about his favourite, was almost startling; in size he looked a mere baby; his limbs, though small, were rounded, but he was one of those rare children, whose face makes all else forgotten; an exquisitely fair and transparent skin; light sunny auburn hair curled close to his head; but for the hue, more like

rings of silkworm's silk than aught else. A faint tinge of colour in each cheek would have made you exclaim—even when little Ralph was drooping his eyelids, as he often did—"What a lovely child!" but when he raised those long black lashes, it was scarcely possible to believe that the large lustrous dark eyes, in whose liquid depths there seemed to be already thought as well as intelligence, could belong to a child not yet three years old. The beauty of both the parents was wonderfully blended in the child.

Frederic Hallam—for although nearly three years older than when we last saw him—he was not too much changed for instant recognition, had thrown himself down on the grass as soon as they had passed the bridge, and drawn little Ralph into his lap.

"And so you think, my boy, poor Bevis has been crying."

The child looked up at him quickly, and then nodded his head gravely, to show that his father had at last caught his meaning. He lay still a minute or two, while Hallam looked earnestly at him, and then struggled himself free.

And finding he was free, he ran away, calling "Beewee," as he named the dog, to follow him; then suddenly spying a butterfly—probably the first in his young experience—he was off in pursuit of "the dear little bird," as he called it.

His peals of soft laughter, and shrieks of delight, were almost wild in their exuberance. At times he seemed, to his father, more like a fairy child than a reality. There was something unfathomable in the depth of those exquisite dark eyes.

They were like Hester's, and unlike them; larger and more expressive—at least the expression was less self-contained. As that child grew to manhood, the wonderful depth in his eyes might indicate a somewhat reserved character, but not a distrustful one; rather a mind that would withhold its treasures from casual observation, to pour them forth eagerly at the prompting of a kindred spirit.

His father lay on the ground watching him, as he ran eagerly in pursuit of the butterfly, tossing his straw hat in the air, and shrieking out unintelligible words, in the excess of his excitement and delight. Hallam sighed as he thought of his extreme delicacy, and the difficulty there had hitherto been in rearing the fragile, beautiful child; and tears sprang to his eyes as he felt, with an agony no one who is not a parent can understand, how hard it would be to yield up this treasure again. Perhaps there is no doctrine so difficult in practice, so easy in theory, as that our children are only lent us, not really our own. And then he

thought how different his existence would be without Ralphie, and he wondered whether the new-found inner-life that his child's hand had mysteriously guided him into, would be a mere baffling labyrinth without him, whether he should return for refuge from the disappointment that he knew would then make itself more deeply felt, to the world and its dangerous pleasures.

Till the child had stolen into his heart so deeply as to make its welfare the beginning and end of each day's thought and action, Frederic Hallam had often said he had no heart at all; he had never felt the power of Love, and, therefore, did not believe in it. After the memorable interview with his wife on his return from Tatton, he had accepted tacitly, and for ever, that there was no hope of mutual affection in his married life. What passed in that interview was never disclosed in words, but the results spoke for themselves. Frederic Hallam's debts were paid entirely; for the first time since he went up to Oxford, he was a free man; his means of living were also evidently enlarged; but, as has been said, to the surprise of most of his friends, before that London season was over—in fact, within a week from his return from Tatton,—they learned that the Hallams had left town suddenly for some country place, which they intended to rent for three years. "If, at the expiration of that time, we find a country life suits us," Hallam wrote to Captain Fortescue, "we shall purchase either Uplands itself, if the owner will part from it, or some other place in the country."

From impulse, probably, rather than from any reasoning process, although he had declared such things would be distasteful to him, Hallam had at once thrown himself, with his usual vitality, into agricultural studies and country pursuits, and although, at first, he found the business of entertaining country neighbours, and returning their visits, a very wearisome routine after the sparkle and variety of a London life, he had a keen sense of natural beauties, and soon became enthusiastic in his admiration of the lovely scenery in the neighbourhood of Uplands.

He had always been a sportsman, and now he took to hunting with a zest that surprised some of the old members of the hunt, who looked upon him as a mere Londoner. His garden, too, was a fertile source of enjoyment, and his gardener found that his master was soon as well informed on the subject of new and rare plants as himself.

He seldom went to London, but when he did so he was sure to visit the flower-shows, and order fresh stores of rarities for his

conservatory. But he could not bear to leave Ralphie now that each day made the child dearer and more interesting, and as Hester resolutely opposed taking him to London, on account of the fatigue of so long a journey, his father had not left home for several months.

In less than a year, the term for which they held Uplands would have expired, and then where would they go? Whenever he asked his wife's opinion on the subject, she always declined giving it, till nearer the period of their departure, saying it would be mere waste of words, as no one could possibly tell what might occur in the interim.

Hallam's own wish was to purchase the property; they had ascertained that the owner was quite willing to sell it, being wedded to a roving life; but he knew that if he expressed this desire, it would be sufficient to provoke his wife's contradiction; he had learned by experience that there was no peace in opposition to her now imperious will, and peace was very dear to Frederic Hallam, even if he could not have love with it.

Disappointment had not soured him, gradually his whole tone of mind had changed; at first the constant estrangement between himself and Hester had been an annoyance; his pride had revolted from the position in which he was placed; but although she retained the control of her property when she came of age, she prevailed on Goldsmith to settle such an income on her husband as should make him independent of her, so long as he lived as he did at present. Her wonderful talents, which seemed to him to have developed suddenly, had much impressed him, and this generosity touched him. He scarcely knew how deeply interested he had become in watching the growth of his wife's character, or how steadily and certainly he was learning to love her.

Yes, to love her, spite of her unvarying coldness and hardness towards himself; and as yet he scarcely knew how much of his passionate love for little Ralphie was due to the child's resemblance to his mother.

CHAPTER II.

RETROSPECT.

“WHEN are you going to invite my mother, Hester? I thought I heard you talking about it.”

Mrs. Hallam looked up from the blue and yellow review, which she had been reading for the last hour, apparently quite unconscious that her husband had entered the room and seated himself on a sofa near her.

“Yes; but I did not know there was any especial reason for hurry,” she said, quietly.

How beautiful she had grown; the advantages of perfect dress, and the polish of good society, had given her all she wanted externally, and a journey to the continent, the previous autumn, had added that indescribable something which few women possess, who have not mixed with foreigners. It had been especially beneficial to Hester; her manner was slightly grave, and although, of course, that is a safer error than mere chattering frivolity, I imagine that smiles may preach as salutary doctrine as frowns or stiffness; at any rate, if frivolity be carried so far as to repel, it is from want of heart or feeling beneath; but a hard unbending manner may, and often does, cover a wealth of mind and sentiment which would benefit the very people alienated by so disagreeable a rind.

This foreign journey had been taken with some neighbours, a family named Crathie, who were enthusiastic admirers of their beautiful friend. Mr. Hallam had been asked to join the party, but he said it was quite impossible they could both leave little Ralphie, who was constantly ailing through the autumn and winter months. For once departing from the rule he had made—ever since his wife had told him in the memorable interview before they began a country life, that she must henceforth despise him—never, if possible, to thwart her inclinations, so that there might be no open cause of quarrel between them, he opposed this journey, and promised if she would only wait another year, when Ralphie might travel, that he would take her wherever she wished to go. It was impossible they could both go, and he thought her place was with her child.

Hester listened calmly till he had ended. She told him he had spoken too late; she had made all her preparations, and could not

disappoint her friends, and then left the room, evidently to avoid further discussion.

Probably, if he had not already begun to love her, and to fancy that at times he saw a change in her manner towards himself, he would have persisted in withholding his consent, and have brought matters to a crisis ; but he longed so much for her affection, that he would not run any further risk of alienating it. Perhaps the temporary absence might bring back some of her old feelings towards him.

It often happens that the praises of others first awaken us to the full perception of the merits of those we live with ; at least, there are some people who do not venture on a decided opinion, till number has given value to it. Frederic Hallam was not so weak as this, but probably the universal admiration his wife excited, both in the country and in London—for they had passed one season in town since Ralphie's birth—had weight with him ; certainly, if he thought the change in her wonderful before, he was astonished when she returned from Paris.

She had been away for several months, and the improvement both in her manner and looks was striking, but it mortified and pained him deeply to find her as cold, as indifferent to him as ever. It was evident that the pains and care she had lavished on self-culture had not been taken for him. Is it to be wondered at, if he worshipped her spite of her treatment of him, that she was popular everywhere, and although considered sarcastic and eccentric by women, was idolized by men, on whom, however, her lofty bearing and a manner totally free from coquetry, imposed due restraint ; it was as if she would have said or rather made her husband feel,—

“ See what a treasure might have been your own.”

More than once since he had begun to think more deeply, he had tried to show Hester, that, however independent she might be in worldly matters, still that no wife can ever be independent of her husband, or emancipated from his control, so long as they two remain one ; but the writhing scorn with which she had answered, silenced him ; he knew her superior powers of reasoning would be sure to triumph, and while she would maintain her calm self-possession, her sarcasm would rouse his pride to say far more than he intended. If she were only a passionate woman, he thought things might have been different ; he would have braved reproaches, even a storm, sure, with the tears that followed, to find some softening towards him, but it seemed hopeless now ;

the real cause of his reluctance to press matters more closely, or seek a reconciliation, was that he feared to know the certainty of what he dreaded, that she was utterly indifferent to his love; and as he became more and more conscious of the falsehood of his marriage, so she seemed to him more justified in resenting it.

It was fortunate that his nature was sanguine and joyous, or he must have become soured by such continued restraint and absence of sympathy.

He was anxious to see his mother, she had not stayed at Uplands since Hester's return, and he wanted her to see the change in his wife; even she, he thought, would admit that she had become very distinguished-looking.

In answer to Hester's remark, he said,—

"She told me, in her last letter, that she was not well, and should be glad to get away from London, just at this gay time, for a while. If we don't ask her, she will go somewhere else."

"That would be absurd," said Hester, who liked her mother-in-law far better than in former days; the elder Mrs. Hallam's reverence for riches having overcome her repugnance to Hester's want of connections, she had treated her with more consideration. "I shall write and tell her she must come to us at once; she ought to have been asked sooner, I wonder you had not thought of it."

"I have written to her this morning, so you can enclose it, if you like," he said; "or, stay, I shall not send my letter now, as I shall see her so soon."

He had really written to invite his mother to fix the time of her visit, in case he should find Hester unwilling to do so; but he thought it would make matters go smoother with Mrs. Hallam if he allowed Hester the full credit of the invitation.

"I shall leave her to name her own time," said Hester, "so, perhaps, it may not be just yet."

"But I must go up to town next week," said her husband, "and I thought I would persuade her to return with me; she likes an escort, you know. Hester, will you go with me?" he added, after a moment's pause.

"Oh, no, thank you; you know our arrangements never suit—I care nothing about these flower-shows you are so fond of—perhaps I may return to town with your mother, but I have not thought about it yet. I am going to drive now, and I shall take Ralphie, unless you want him."

"No, oh, no; the drive will do him good," said Hallam, and moving with a graceful stateliness, his wife left him alone to think.

And he was full of bitter thoughts against her, for she had just inflicted a keen disappointment. He had been thinking lately that if they went alone together to London for a little while, with not even Ralphie to come between them, the reconciliation he longed for might be effected; he should see more of Hester than he could at home, where her days seemed purposely planned out so as to separate her pursuits from his, and he should be able to assure himself whether any remains of her former love lingered beneath her habitually cold manner. Her last words were almost sufficient to prove that there was no hope of this. Surely if a wife loved her husband at all, she could not help showing some sympathy in his pursuits; it would be so easy for her to take a little interest in his flowers; but he did not understand how trifling all this seemed to Hester.

So long as her rooms were well furnished and arranged with due formality, she was satisfied. She cared not for, perhaps despised, the elegant superfluities, if you will, that betoken woman's presence in a dwelling. Some of the most endearing links in love's chain are not necessarily useful. Hester was very *real* in everything; but there may be too great a preponderance of one good quality.

He mused with a heavy heart on all this, and he thought it might have been better if he had said at once to Hester, that he wished her to accompany him to London; but then, if she had decidedly refused, he could not have borne it; he should have reminded her of her duty, and they should have quarrelled; anything better than that. A secret feeling told him that matters could not long continue as they were at present, that his feelings would burst from the control under which he held them, and then what would ensue? He could not bear to think of it, for if he found it impossible to effect a reconciliation with Hester, they must part; they could not live the past year over again.

"But where is the use of dwelling on the black side of things?" he said to himself, cheerfully. "Every one must have some trial or trouble. I wonder if other married couples are often circumstanced as we are, or if ours is a rare case."

And then he went on thinking over the married people he knew, and their apparent happiness; and one remarkable difference struck him between Hester and other wives; they were usually surrounded by affectionate relations; the husbands seemed quite as much to belong to their wives' families as to their own; in fact, he knew it was the received creed, that a wife never

amalgamates with her husband's people, as he does with hers ; and he wondered it had not occurred to him before, that in alienating Hester from her own relations, he had checked and narrowed her sympathies. The colour rose to his forehead ; he remembered his wish to separate her from the Wrenshaws till she came of age, lest their influence might be adverse to his own, in the management of her property—truly a fruitless precaution.

Mrs. Bonham had written to congratulate Hester on Ralphie's birth, and had told her that she was also a mother ; but he recollected that his wife had seemed annoyed, and had thrown the letter contemptuously aside ; he believed she had not answered it, and he remembered, with regret, how he had first put a stumbling-block in the way of her relations with Lucy.

Her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw, had lived abroad ever since he and his wife had come to Uplands, so that he could not feel they had been neglected ; but as he thought of Lucy's bright affectionate face, and the warmth of some of her former letters to Hester, he wished he had not been so hasty, and that that invitation to Stedding had been accepted, the refusal of which had apparently caused the estrangement between the cousins.

CHAPTER III.

THE POET.

JACOB and Lucy had been more fortunate than their wealthy cousins. They were just as much in love with each other as when we first knew them, and they had three rosy, healthy darlings, instead of poor little solitary Ralphie.

But they were all girls, and this was a great disappointment, not so much to Jacob or Lucy as to Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw. She did think Lucy might have done better than she had ; in her own case, to be sure, there was some excuse, seeing her poor dear Frank had died, out of what Mrs. Wrenshaw called, "the necessary course of things ;" but to have three children, one after another, and not a boy among them to be brought up to his father's profession, was vexing indeed. Except for this one complaint, Mrs. Frank was a most exemplary grandmother, spoiling and overfeeding the children to her heart's content, and never allowing any one to find fault with them but herself.

"I tell you what, Jacob," said Lucy to her husband, "between you and mamma those children will be ruined."

Jacob, who was occupied in feeding his second daughter—aged one year and a half—with strawberries, affected deafness to this appeal.

Lucy, junior, a demure-faced maiden of three years, with round blue eyes and fair shining curls, the eyes being almost overwhelmed by the superabundant cheeks, which made a pouting rosebud of her pretty mouth, lifted her eyes from her plate, and looked gravely at her mother.

"What is ruined?" she said.

And the next little one, with its mouth full of strawberries, echoed the question, of course, with an importance that made both Lucy and Jacob laugh.

"It shan't be ruined, at any rate," said Lucy, pressing her youngest—a baby of a few months only—closer to her; for, on Sunday afternoon, the little ones had dessert with papa, and baby came in and played the part of an excited spectator.

"Grandmamma will be here directly," said Jacob, looking at his watch; "now, little Lucy, put grandma's chair all ready."

The small Lucy gave a reluctant look at her strawberries, but still she bustled out of her high chair, holding cautiously by the edge of the table.

The chair was placed there ready, but Jacob seemed to think that the little creature ought to be encouraged in the notion that it was all her doing, because she drew it one inch nearer the table.

"That will do, darling," said her mother; "good little girl—kiss mamma."

Lucy held up her wee mouth, repeating gravely,

"Dood ittle dirl—isn't me clever?"

In which idea both the proud parents were, of course, delighted to coincide.

"There's granama—now run and open the parlour door, Lucy."

And in came Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw, looking as young and bright as ever; almost as young as her daughter, for matrimony and its attendant cares had not benefited Lucy's health—spite of her happiness.

There was the same bright look, but her cheeks had lost their bloom, and her shoulders somewhat of their roundness; her hands were no longer the white dimpled playthings they had been when Jacob married her; but then Lucy had been no make-believe mother. Her whole character had greatly changed since we last

saw her, and the change was in nothing more perceptible than in her manner to her mother. There is nothing that seems to make a parent's love truly appreciated, till we have children of our own: then, how each loving care we render, how each heart-throb of affection teaches what has been felt for us. Happy, if the knowledge come before it is too late to try and atone for the stings and wounds, which even if we have been, in the world's eye, good children, our waywardness, our caprice, and, above all, our impertinent words, must have inflicted.

Till the birth of her first baby, Lucy had scarcely realised how great her mother's tenderness was. Mrs. Frank shone in a sick room: she was not absurd there; she obeyed the doctor's instructions to the letter, with a gentleness and an absence of fuss and worry, greatly conducive to the progress of her patient, and by her self-control—for it is self-control for a talkative woman not to chatter—and ready thoughtfulness, she rose higher in her son-in-law's good opinion than he had ever thought possible. He began to understand now where some of his darling wife's virtues came from. She was very superior to her mother, because she was never silly; but still he was now so fond of Mrs. Wrenshaw that he could generally tolerate her silliness; she has no husband to keep her in order, thought Jacob, and she has those Miss Skippers to fill her head with their nonsense.

And now, as she came in for her regular Sunday visit after afternoon church, he was as much pleased to see her as the children were, although it was hard work to get her to take any notice of any one except the baby. How perversely mothers and grandmothers always cling to the youngest, as if they thought every one but themselves wished to ill-treat and neglect those soft, rose-dimpled morsels of humanity; but little Lucy and Alice had no intention of being neglected, and "granama," as they called her, was obliged to turn round and listen to them in order to free her silk gown from their strawberry-stained fingers.

"Bless you, my poppet," she said, stooping to kiss Lucy, while she lifted Alice on to her lap.

"Alice wants strawberries, doesn't she a darling?"

"Des," nodded Alice, repeating the words after her own fashion, which her grandmother pronounced to be as plain as plain could be, and then proceeded to dive into her pocket for the weekly packet of sugar-plums.

Lucy meekly protested that Jacob had already given them too much fruit, and that the sugar-plums had better be put away.

"Too bad of him, it is," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, looking slyly at her son-in-law, "but I don't see the fairness of punishing the children for his naughtiness, so they shall just scramble for the sweets while Matty clears away."

"Come into the garden, grandmamma, and I will gather you some roses," said Jacob; "they are coming into bloom fast in this warm sunshine."

"You come too, Lucy," said her mother, "I've something to tell you while the chicks are busy with their sugar-plums. Now, what do you think Jemima told me this very afternoon?"

"I don't know," said Lucy, feeling utterly at a loss to keep pace with Miss Skipper's stores of information.

"Well, now, you must try and guess; something about some one you used to care for very much, Lucy."

"Not Hester, mother!"

"Well, it's next to being about Hester, because it's one of the family, who'll, of course, know all her goings on. Well, Jemima says that Miss Hallam is coming to stay with the Ainsworths, and, of course, it will be proper for you to call, being a connection."

"I don't know that," said Jacob. "Of course, Lucy can call on Mrs. Ainsworth, as she often does, but I should much rather she did not make her call to Miss Hallam."

"Perhaps it may be no relation," said Lucy, feeling a strange longing to hear something about the friend who seemed so estranged from her. "Hallam is not a common name, but still it belongs to more than one family."

"No, my dear, I assure you, I said exactly the same to Jemima, and she persisted that Dorothy Ainsworth had told her that the Miss Hallam who is coming to stay with them is own aunt to the Mr. Hallam who married our Hester."

"But," said Lucy, looking earnestly at her husband, "you do not object, do you, Jacob, to my calling while Miss Hallam is in Stedding? I do so long," she continued, and the tears glistened in her eyes, "to hear something about poor dear Hester. I always believe the letter I wrote to her was lost."

"Here are the roses," said her husband, stopping before a tree laden with crimson clusters, "and here is one for you, Lucy. Give me baby, I want to see if she has grown any heavier; you can send Susan for her when you go in."

Lucy knew from his manner that her husband did not wish any more said about Hester, and she went in-doors to make tea,

wondering that so forgiving a temper as Jacob's could nourish so deep a grudge.

But it was not so : he avoided any allusion to the Hallams, because of the dislike he had at one time felt to the prospect of an intimacy between his wife and Hester : he had often congratulated himself on keeping the secret of Peter Stasson's news about Kirton's Farm ; for he felt sure that, if he had told it, Lucy would at once have written to express her delight, and, after all, would have been disappointed. How we all grope in the dark ! Who can say that Lucy's silence was not the chief cause of Hester's dislike to revisit Kirton's Farm, and who shall say if she had revisited it, how beneficial would have been the influence of her cousin's bright, loving, hopeful nature. It was, at first, Lucy's one great trial, that her husband could not be brought to a favourable opinion of Hester, and as a man's likings and dislikings where the wife is impressionable, generally prevail, she had gone so far as to acknowledge to herself that perhaps she should not think as highly of her cousin now, as in former times ; but still she must always love her.

The party was soon assembled round the tea-table. Lucy's drawing-room was the pride of her heart, and the children were never allowed to drink tea there ; therefore they were again in what even Lucy now called the parlour. It was wonderful how one by one she had yielded all her little nonsensical ways ; with the exception of the dreamy fits which she could not quite conquer, she had become what Miss Jemima Skipper called "a plain-spoken sensible young woman."

"Alice is not high enough," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, "are you, precious one ?"

To which small Lucy of course replied,—

"'Tittle Alice not high 'nuff pecious."

Her grandmother was searching among some music-books and folios, on an old-fashioned whatnot, and presently drew out a book, which she thought would just do to raise Alice.

In trying to arrange it under the child, without removing her, Alice slipped from her chair, and, as her grandmother tried to prevent her from falling, the folio slid from her hands.

"Gracious me," exclaimed Mrs. Wrenshaw, "why, the book's bewitched ; it wants sewing up, Lucy."

Lucy looked, and gave way to an uncontrollable fit of laughter ; but Jacob's dismayed face soon restored her composure. All around her and her mother lay strewn sheets of manuscript covered

with Jacob's handwriting. She tried to collect them as quickly as possible, but not before her mother's sharp eyes had seen that verses were written upon them.

She picked one up.

"Why, it's poetry in your writing, Jacob. Well, I never!" she exclaimed, fixing her eyes on the doctor, who looked a picture of guilty confusion; "to think of a father of three children making such a Tom Noddy of himself!—*Sir Erardos, a Romaunt in Ten Cantos*—romaunt, indeed, another way of spelling rubbish. Jacob, Jacob, so sure as men or women take to scribbling, so sure they come to ruin. Why, there'll be Lucy taking to it next, and letting the baby tumble in the fire, or giving it the ink-bottle to play with. Oh, Jacob! why, do you know, I caught Lucy writing a drama, I think she called it, when she was twelve years old; so I just put it all in the fire, and declared I'd tell every one if she ever tried again. I knew fast enough she'd never grow up respectable if she took to that sort of trash."

"But," said Jacob, recovering himself, and speaking rather stiffly, "I really think we may all employ our leisure as we like, and, besides, I meant to—to sell that poem when it is finished."

"Now don't, Jacob, or I shall never leave off laughing at you; sell your pills, not your poetry, sell! fiddle-faddle; you'll sell that 'romaunt'—what on earth such a word means, I'm sure I can't tell—to the buttermilkman, I expect, for waste paper, only don't sell it in Stedding; once it got known you'd been such a goose, why you'd lose all your practice at once. I wonder what Jemima Skipper'd say; surely, Lucy, you don't hold with such tantrums—a doctor writing rhymes!"

"Well, mother, I agree with Jacob, that he has a right to employ his leisure as he likes best."

"And I say," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, warming in defence of her own opinions, "that his leisure might be better employed in amusing you and reading to you when he comes home than in writing twaddle about knights and cantos."

"But, mother," said Lucy, laughing, "suppose nothing amuses me so much as to watch him write, and hear him read it aloud to me afterwards—and I help, too, sometimes, don't I, Jacob?"

"I believe she could write better than I can, if she chose." Jacob had recovered his good temper, although he had felt the attack on his poetry more than he would one on his professional skill. "But I quite agree with you, that the subject had better not be mentioned to the Miss Skippers, or any more at all. I

know it would be considered unprofessional, and therefore I never mention it."

"Well, all I can say is," said his mother-in-law, feeling exceedingly aggrieved at what she considered obstinacy, "that one business is enough at a time for any man. You'll write poetry instead of a prescription, some fine day, Jacob, and then you'll wish you'd listened to me. I only know if I'd had the least idea of what was in that book, when Lucy was up-stairs last time, I'd have been tempted to burn every bit of the senseless scribble. Good night, my darlings," she said to the children, who were being taken away to bed; "poor little dears, I hope you'll not come to harm from it."

"I beg your pardon, Jacob, if I was rude about that poetry, but it did put me out," she said, as later in the evening he came to the door to let her out, when she had said good-bye to all. "You know I love you very much, but you know what I always think of you; there never was a man who worked so hard when he was at play, or played so hard when he ought to have been at work."

CHAPTER IV.

AN INSINUATION.

"WHY, Hallam, you are the last man I expected to see in town; I fancied you had turned hermit;" and Captain Fortescue took his friend's arm with the warm pleasure we feel when we meet an old friend after a long separation.

"I have only just arrived from Uplands," said Hallam, equally pleased to see his friend; "we missed you the year before last, when we spent a few weeks in town—you were in Ireland with your regiment, I think?"

The friends were not good correspondents—their letters had been few and far between; and if Hester's name were mentioned at all, it was in so casual a manner, that Fortescue could not have judged whether Hallam's feelings remained unchanged.

The subject was painful—new interests had come between him and his dream of friendship for his friend's wife, and without having forgotten him, Hallam's face seemed more like a memory than a present fact. Fred made him dine with him, and before they parted that night, Fortescue confessed to himself, that he

liked his old friend better than ever ; only he thought his spirits less equal than they formerly were.

He was puzzled at this, for from the terms in which he spoke of his child, he thought he must be happy in his home life. Some great change had taken place in him—he had kept to the intention he had announced, had forsworn betting, and seemed to have become a steady family man. Fortescue attributed the marvel to Hester's influence. It was strange that her husband should scarcely mention her.

“And which of you is this wonderful paragon like?” said Fortescue, laughing ; when, for about the twelfth time, Hallam had launched forth in praise of little Ralphie.

“Well, I suppose you don't find it very amusing. You see I've become an ordinary father, after all ; but if you only saw him—who is he like ? I scarcely know who his eyes are like—the rest of him is every inch his mother ; but his eyes—sometimes, Fortescue, I think he can't live, they are so wonderful.”

Fortescue laughed again.

“I can't help it, Fred, it is so amusing to listen, and to think it is you, Hallam—you, who used to have such a horror of even visiting where there were any children.”

“It is the same in this as in most other things ; make a thing your own, and then see how it rises in value.”

Fortescue thought he had heard that saying applied to everything but a wife, where perhaps the motto—

'Tis expectation makes a blessing dear,

may be more apposite ; but although Hallam did not mention his wife, his conversation was so much less selfish and worldly, than in former times, that his friend felt a respect for him, which had, perhaps, never mingled with his previous affection. It was pleasant to hear from his own lips, that he was quite free of Goldsmith, in fact had no debts at all.

They met again the following morning, and Hallam pressed his friend to come down and get some shooting in the autumn. Fortescue hesitated—he had an undefinable reluctance to see Hester again—at any rate he should like to be quite sure how matters stood between husband and wife, before he became their guest. He felt almost convinced that the change in Fred was to be attributed to the happy quiet life he led ; and that the excitement and bustle of London depressed him, as excitement often does, when we are unused to it. Still he felt too anxious that it

might be so, to refrain altogether from the subject, spite of their last conversation under the trees in Piccadilly. He had been speaking of the Hallams to another friend that morning, who had met Hester in Brussels, and had been charmed with her beauty and her style.

"I suppose it is not the fashion for husbands to rave about their wives as they do about their children," he said; "but I heard a most enthusiastic description of Mrs. Hallam just now."

"You had better come down and judge for yourself," said his friend, but his smile seemed forced. "I do not think you will say she could easily be overrated."

He turned the conversation easily and rapidly to other things, and seemed so much gayer than on the previous evening, that Fortescue felt more puzzled than ever. Surely, in the renewed confidence that had sprung up between them, deeper far, and more earnest than it had ever been before, if Fred's love for his wife were what so many little hints and casual allusions had made him imagine it to be, why should he speak in such a cold, guarded manner? It was so unlike his open-hearted frankness about other things, and he might have seen that Fortescue had made an effort to broach the subject, and therefore, one would have thought, would have tried not to evade it.

He was leaving town for a few days. Hallam said he should be at Uplands before his friend's return, but he tried hard to make him fix a time for his visit.

"It will, perhaps, be your last chance of seeing the place, and the country round is worth looking at; we can stay on till November, I think, though our term expires in June; but we don't want to go away just when the garden is at its best."

"I wonder you go away at all; why don't you buy it?"

"There has been some talk about it, but the owner asks rather a long price. I should like nothing better than to end my days at Uplands."

The friends parted; Fortescue wondering at this new trait in Hallam's character; formerly change was essential to his restless, roving nature. He must be happy, thoroughly and entirely so; nothing else could make a man contentedly forego London and all its endless variety; but then Captain Fortescue was essentially a Londoner; and as, when we look at the outside of a painted window, we only see an intricate, undefined-like mass, so is it impossible for those whose tastes and sympathies differ, to form any correct judgment of the happiness and enjoyment of each other.

Neither Captain Fortescue nor Hester had the same capacity for enjoyment as Hallam : I believe this to be a gift more than an acquisition ; there are people whose perceptions of the beautiful, both in nature and art, are almost painfully intense, and these, generally speaking, extract the keenest enjoyment from human pleasures—I do not say worldly pleasures—such people will enjoy a day in the country, a chat with an old friend, as ardently, even more so, than the most elaborately devised amusement ; they are born with the faculty of keen enjoyment, and they usually manage to eschew disagreeables.

Frederic Hallam was essentially happy-natured, and as he now walked towards Wilton Place, all his anxiety about Hester seemed lightened, in the contemplated pleasure of showing little Ralphie to his mother, and witnessing her delight at the improvement in his health.

Meanwhile, Captain Fortescue was on his way to Goldsmith. His brother Gerald had become so involved in betting transactions, that he had been obliged to leave London rather suddenly, and Lady Helena had accompanied him. Several of his numerous engagements with Mr. Goldsmith remained unsettled ; and Fortescue, who, from some deeply-founded, although unproven reason, greatly distrusted the lawyer, had undertaken to arrange for his brother.

Mr. Goldsmith received him with his usual suave courtesy, but he buried his face so continually in his pocket-handkerchief, was so deprecatory with his hands, and seemed so involuntarily restless, that his visitor doubted him more than ever.

He was very hard to deal with, would not even grant the time he had often allowed to Fortescue, and refused entirely to renew for the largest amount.

“ I scarcely expected this of you, Goldsmith ; in my time, you must have made quite profit enough out of me, to enable you (I don't say to induce, for I know, with you rich men, the more you get the more you desire) to grant my brother more liberal terms.”

“ My dear sir,” said Goldsmith, eying him with his head slightly bent on one side, “ you must be joking this morning. If all gentlemen were as careful and prudent as yourself, society would go on in a far calmer and more equable manner. You never lived far beyond your means, as a rule ; it was only for the exceptions you visited me, I think—only the exceptions.”

He laughed so heartily at this idea, that the tears must have come, for he wiped his eyes with his pocket-handkerchief.

Then, seeing Fortescue look impatient, he went on,—

“Forgive me; but I esteem myself obliged to you, my dear sir, for your introductions; many of my best clients have come to me entirely through your recommendation.”

Fortescue winced—in other words, he had helped Goldsmith to ruin many of his clients; if this were true, it would have been a satisfaction to have shaken him.

“I believe you give me more credit than I deserve,” said he, scornfully; “except my friend Mr. Hallam, I have no remembrance of sending any one to you.”

“Well, but it comes to the same thing, Captain Fortescue,” said the lawyer, smiling; he perfectly understood and enjoyed his annoyance. “You brought Mr. Hallam, and he sent others—you see my debt remains the same. Have you ever been to Uplands?”

“No, I have not,” said Fortescue; some irresistible impulse made him determine to conceal the fact of his friend’s presence in London—perhaps a lurking dread of Goldsmith’s baneful influence, for he well knew how, at the outset, the lawyer had encouraged Fred’s betting propensities.

“A fine place—a very fine place, indeed.”

“I wonder they do not buy it?”

Goldsmith raised both hands.

“Couldn’t, couldn’t, possibly, my dear sir. Why, in the first place, your friend was so over head and ears in debt, that Mrs. Hallam’s fortune will take some time to recover the hole made in it, and in the next I think the money’s far safer where it is.”

Fortescue was strongly tempted to ask where that was; but a slight flush on the lawyer’s cheek warned him that he was personally interested in the matter; if he betrayed any suspicion he would be on his guard again.

“Ah! I was away at the time Mrs. Hallam came of age. I never heard how that business was settled.”

Goldsmith looked at him searchingly, but he appeared so calm and indifferent, that he believed he was merely asking to satisfy his curiosity.

“I thought every one had heard the story,” he said, “your friend hoped to have it all his own way, but he was mistaken. Mrs. Frederic Hallam is a noble-spirited woman, with far too much respect for her father’s memory to yield up his property to be made ducks and drakes of.

It was so utterly unlike the usual mystery of the man to

speak thus openly of his client's affairs, that each moment Fortescue's suspicion of him increased; but he only looked inquiringly.

"I am sorry to say it, because he is your friend, Captain Fortescue; but I greatly fear"—he buried his face for a moment—"that my poor friend's child was most unfortunate in her choice of a husband. I have reason to believe"—he looked hard at his visitor—"that he married her entirely for her money. She has done marvels for him—marvels—made sacrifices such as few women would have ventured on. Poor thing, poor thing! she little knows with what result; no, Captain Fortescue, I could not, knowing all I do, far more than poor Mrs. Hallam does, sanction the purchase of Uplands."

Fortescue could hardly restrain himself, as he heard these insinuations against his friend.

"I fancied from what you said just now, and from what I had also heard, that Hallam was living quite within his income."

"What a thing fancy is," said the lawyer, and he shook his head with mournful emphasis.

"Then do you mean to assert, Mr. Goldsmith, that Frederic Hallam is as deep in debt as ever?"

"My dear sir, I assert nothing; you cannot expect me to tell tales of my clients. Who is to say why Mr. Frederic Hallam pays me sudden and secret visits? It may be for friendship, for advice, for anything but money."

"Then he does visit you," said Fortescue, as carelessly as he could; "have you seen him lately?"

"I really must decline exposing my client's affairs, even to so deeply interested a friend; but I can answer your last question. No, I have not seen Mr. Hallam for some time past."

"Then you are expecting to see him now?"

Goldsmith threw his head back, and laughed in his peculiar silent way.

"Well, Captain Fortescue," he said, recovering himself and laying his head on one side; "what should you say, now, as a man who has been about town some years, who knows something of the world? The spring of the year offers some attractions to a betting man, eh?"

"Ah then, you know Hallam still bets. I had heard that he had quite given up that sort of thing."

The lawyer relapsed into another silent laugh, which lasted so long that there seemed to be a risk of suffocation.

"You must excuse me," he said at last. "But you are not quite so innocent as to believe that, I think, Captain Fortescue?"

"I always believe well of my friends. But I must be going, Mr. Goldsmith." He evaded giving any direct reply, and after some more conversation about Gerald Fortescue's affairs, he left the office.

He felt utterly confounded. Something—he could scarcely say what—but an irresistible influence had prevented him from being open with the lawyer. Which had deceived him, Hallam or Goldsmith? and then he thought of the two men, and it was impossible to hesitate. With all his faults, he had always considered his friend truthful and honourable; besides, when he had asked him if his present visit were connected with any racing transactions, Hallam had replied so promptly and frankly, that he had quite given up betting—no—he could not believe he had purposely deceived him. Why should he do so? What end would it serve? However good we may be, it is wonderful how often the rule of expediency suggests itself as a fitting measure by which to try our fellow-men.

He walked on, feeling perplexed how to act; the longer he reflected on the lawyer's ambiguous words, the stronger grew his belief in his friend's innocence, and again came the question—what motive could Goldsmith have for misrepresenting matters? Fortescue knew that Hallam had a fixed income totally independent of his wife; and, if he lived within it, what possible transactions could take place between him and Goldsmith? Besides, his friend had only that morning said that he and debt were strangers, and likely to continue so.

But, then, if Goldsmith talked in this way to him, he would probably do so to others; at any rate, Hallam ought to know what was said, and have the power of silencing such falsehood, if it were falsehood, and if it were not, after all, Fortescue asked himself, what business was it of his? A week ago he would have declared himself almost indifferent to Frederic Hallam; but now it was different; sight had quickened love, he felt more, and deeper, affection for him than he had ever done, far more esteem than for his own brother;—he would not believe ill of him—it seemed cowardly to allow him to be slandered without giving him warning.

Suddenly he remembered how the lawyer's sallow cheek had flushed, and he at once saw, or thought he saw, to the bottom of the

mystery. Hallam had probably ridiculed Goldsmith, and given him mortal offence, and he revenged himself by speaking against him ; and yet he wondered how he dared to do so openly. If he had known how entirely Goldsmith believed him to be alienated from Hallam, he might have been less surprised ; and, shrewd as the lawyer was, he had not calculated on Fortescue's unworldliness ; he himself would have been afraid to tell a man anything he had heard against him, for fear of being dragged into what might turn out awkwardly ; and he judged the captain by himself. It seems easier for the simple and straight-forward to see through intrigue than for the intriguer to comprehend the ways of sincerity.

Fortescue resolved to see his friend before he left town. He sent a note to his hotel, asking him to come round that evening, as he was himself to start early the following morning. The man returned with the note. Mr. Hallam had left town that afternoon hurriedly, had paid his bill, and driven away with his luggage in a cab—the people did not remember where, but believed it was to a railway-station : there were so many persons coming and going just at this time of year—it was impossible to keep count of them.

Fortescue's heart sank. Had Hallam gone to the races, after all ? He had no leisure to pursue inquiry : he was only in town for a few days, and must return next morning, but, at any rate, he could and would warn Hallam to beware of Goldsmith if he ever had the opportunity, meanwhile he wrote to him to Uplands before he went to bed, telling him what had taken place between himself and the lawyer.

CHAPTER V.

RALPHIE.

HESTER sat bending over the crib in which Ralphie lay, listening for his breathing. Hitherto, it had been loud and irregular, but during the last two hours it was scarcely audible. She had taken off her dress, and sat wrapped in a loose white gown. Paler than ever, her fair hair strained back from her temples, anxious watching had made her look years older already ; and the likeness between her and the quiet sufferer was very apparent now : his long lashes lay almost unnaturally dark on his white cheeks, the lips pressed closely together—how soon the mouth tells of health or sickness

in a sleeping child—they were not rosy, but almost black with fever, as were also the circles beneath his closed eyelids.

He had been taken ill soon after his father's departure, and the country doctor—an old-fashioned, ignorant man—had treated it lightly as a slight cold.

Although Hester loved her boy, she never lavished a mother's caresses and tenderness on him ; at least no one had ever seen her do so, nor was she, like most young mothers, over anxious about his health. Her husband's care on this point almost excited her contempt. She had two nurses for little Ralphie, and she was scrupulously careful in investigating the ventilation and arrangement of the nurseries ; also, at stated times, he came to her in the drawing-room, but no one had ever caught Hester fondling her boy as mothers only can fondle ; that is, mothers in general, for Frederick Hallam's tenderness with his child equalled that of any mother. After all, men can be more intensely tender than women, although all do not show it to their children, and if they do, it is rather to the girls than to the boys.

Therefore, the nurses had felt surprised when the child became decidedly ill, to hear their mistress say she should not leave him again until the London doctor, for whom she had telegraphed to her husband, arrived. She might well look pale and exhausted ; she had been by the child's bedside now for many hours, latterly her sense of hearing strained in different directions. She was listening eagerly for carriage wheels, and also with far deeper anxiety for the imperceptible breathing of the child ; suddenly it flashed upon her that he had lain thus since the morning, undisturbed. The doctor had said sleep was more necessary than food ; but suppose he were mistaken, and she had no confidence in his skill ; the child might be sinking from mere inanition, was it that—that had caused the strange change in his breathing ? She bent closer and closer, there was no audible breath ; she put her hand on the little heart, there was still a languid movement : for the first time a strong terror seized her—he was dying perhaps. How should she tell Fred his child was dead ? He had left him safe and well in her charge ; he would look on her as Ralphie's murderess. Why had she not thought sooner how long he had been without food, and yet the doctor had said the fever must be starved while it was so high. She looked eagerly round, there was some milk and water on a little table near ; she put her arm under Ralphie's head, and tried to raise it ; it was like fire in its scorching heat.

"Ralphie, darling, Ralphie," she murmured, "papa's coming; Ralphie, wake up and see papa."

She knew, as if by instinct, the sure talisman of her boy's love, for, although he tyrannized over his father, the child loved him passionately.

No answer came, the little limbs seemed to Hester to be growing set and rigid; she tried to open the closely pressed lips, but the jaws were firmly pressed together, and resisted all her efforts, weakened by the terror of hurting the unconscious sufferer.

She looked round again in the mechanical way in which people seek in some mortal peril for outward help, and as she did so, her eyes fell on her open desk, where she had written the telegram.

She gently laid the child's head on the pillow, and passing swiftly round, took up the quill pen from the desk, dipped the feathered end into the milk and water, and again raising his head, she touched the lips several times before they unclosed, and then she managed to drop the liquid from the end of the feather into the mouth. Little by little, the rigid jaws relaxed and parted, the eyes opened slowly, but without any ray of intelligence, and as they did this for the second time, her sharpened sense heard the wheels at last. They came nearer and nearer, but she dared not withdraw her arm from Ralphie; she felt that the slightest movement might extinguish his re-awakened life. So she stood,—still as the senseless child, almost as white as her dress, waiting for what she felt would be her boy's doom.

It seemed long to her before the door opened; the nurse just looked into the room, then went away, and, after a few moments, Frederic Hallam entered, followed by a stout, middle-aged man, with remarkably intelligent eyes and a square massive head.

He bent over Ralphie for a few moments, asking for more light as he did so, for the blinds were drawn down. Then turning to Hester, he asked sharply and rapidly, how long the child had been insensible, and what nourishment it had taken. He started back at her answer, and threw up both his arms.

"You're killing him," he said, roughly; "the only chance for that child now is constant sustenance, if it be only a teaspoonful at a time. What did you say you gave him with the feather?"

It was wonderful how his manner subdued her; she answered as meekly as a child.

"Milk and water!" said the doctor, with a contemptuous emphasis; "it should be brandy, ma'am, and must be, if you want to keep your boy. Will you be so good as to put me a teaspoonful of brandy into a wine-glass of water."

"But, doctor," said a gentle, plaintive voice behind him, "I never heard of giving so young a child brandy; there must be fearful risk of increasing the fever."

The doctor only looked at her in his quick decided way, and turning to Fred said,—

"The fewer here the better; leave your wife, she knows what she's about."

Mrs. Hallam looked aghast at such uncourteous treatment; but she submitted to take her son's arm, and allow him to conduct her to her bedchamber.

The stupor lasted, and for longer than a week Ralphie's life seemed to be more than doubtful.

The London doctor had warned Hester emphatically that medicine could be of scarcely any service in comparison with nourishment, in fact, that recovery depended entirely on the vigilant care with which the child was nursed; and except for a few hours of necessary rest, she rarely left the room. And yet even at such a time as this, when a mutual sympathy seemed to be drawing her again towards her husband, she was as coldly on her guard as ever, as if she feared to let some hidden feeling escape.

Spite of his absorbing anxiety about the child, Hallam was greatly touched by her unremitting care and watchfulness, still to him, disposed to take the most favourable view of her conduct, her devotion seemed more like the enforced fulfilment of duty than the outpouring of maternal affection.

His mother apparently could not refrain from expressing her opinion. She was herself one of those women with feelings always on the surface ready for use. I am not sure whether she considered feeling of any value, if kept out of sight. She could not understand or sound the deeps of a self-repressed heart, too intense in its affection to expose it to common eyes. There is a medium between these natures, and a happier one, I think, both for themselves and others. One expects a woman's affection to be demonstrative, although it need not be so displayed, as to excite ridicule; but there is something that savours as strongly of self-love, in the woman who so represses feeling as to grieve and disappoint those

dear to her, as of self-conceit in her who makes a lavish display of wifely or motherly devotion. The only superior claim of the former is, that we believe this article to be a genuine one; the latter we consider merely imitation silver-gilt.

But Mrs. Hallam considered herself, or perhaps it is more just to say, wished others to consider her, a model mother. She had undergone an immense amount of petty interference (spite of her rich connections) from her sister-in-law in the management of Fred, and it was right and fitting she should have her turn again. To women of very shallow understanding and limited powers of intellect, there is probably no occupation more delightful than either mentally or practically setting their neighbours to rights. When we are young and still smarting from the pricks of some well-meaning busybody, who—his feelings being only skin deep—passes for “such a kind, good-tempered creature,” we resolve, when the power of interference falls to our lot, that things shall be quite different; how magnanimous we will then be, how large-minded; in fact, we shoot a load of paving-stones in the road of our future, which would take a lifetime, and a most conscientious one too, to lay properly.

The older one grows, the more impossible does it become to judge what one's opinions would be under differing circumstances. A Right and a Wrong there must always be, a Truth and a Falsehood; but, between these, how wide a plain spreads itself, over which different shades of opinion are riding a steeple-chase blindfold. One asks oneself sometimes, is there such a thing as beauty, as age, as talent, as worldliness, or simplicity of heart, as sincerity or courtesy? When one sees how that little piece of coloured glass each neighbour wears in his eye changes the hue—nay, the very quality of the attribute—what can one do in such a turmoil? Must we distrust our own judgment, and cling to that of each of our fellow creatures in turn, with whom we may chance to feel sympathy, or who may obtain a temporary influence over us?

I do not think so; we may distrust our own judgment on high grounds, and especially if we allow it to be guided by impulse or self-will, and also because we see that it is unconsciously influenced by outward circumstances. The preaching our own opinions, *vivâ voce*, seems the worst evil, if we can only have sufficient self-control and courtesy to economise them, we may learn very much from our neighbours; their very follies, and narrow-minded enunciation of their own theories, may serve to warn us against similar absurdities.

Mrs. Hallam, however, did not share one weakness of her sex : if she interfered, it was personally ; she did not screen herself behind other people's opinions, and try to make you swallow the unpleasant potion, *rechauffé*.

"Frederic, does Hester ever kiss Ralph?" Mrs. Hallam did not choose to call him "Ralphie."

Her son started, he and his mother were walking up and down the garden on the moated side. She had been vainly trying to persuade him that his child would recover.

"Yes, mother, of course she does ; she would scarcely be the devoted nurse she is, if she were not very fond of him."

"Ah, well, that does not follow, my dear Frederic ; you are such an affectionate fellow, that you think all others the same ; but, you know, I always did consider Hester cold, and I think so still. I do not think I have ever seen her kiss the child."

It was a hard position for Hallam : could he contradict her, when his heart was aching with longing for the love his wife would not give ? Would not—there was the secret of his sorrow—he knew too well that Hester could love if she chose ; she had worshipped him once. The doubt that tormented him was whether her love was, indeed, cold and dead for ever ; whether her unforgiveness would for ever render it impossible for him to re-awaken it from slumber.

"There are people," he said, at last, "whose feelings are just as warm towards their children as others who make more fuss in displaying them. I pet that little darling,"—he turned away his head, his voice quivering as he spoke—"more than his mother does, and yet I could not have nursed him as she has done ; it is only motherly love and instinct that can anticipate wants and possible evils."

"You're quite mistaken, Frederic ; nursing is a gift which comes to people naturally. In any case, Hester would be an excellent nurse, nothing shows it more than her reluctance to divide her charge with any one. Really, she is quite strange about it ; I went into the room just now as quietly as possible, and suggested, in the lowest possible whisper, that toast-and-water should be occasionally substituted for these constant stimulants——"

"I am sorry you went in, mother. Hester told me yesterday, she wished for no one but nurse and myself, and she is only following out the doctor's instructions."

"My dear Frederic, you must not spoil your wife ; I speak, my dear boy," and she laid her soft white hand tenderly on his

shoulder,—“I speak out of the effusion of a mother’s love. You are the child’s father as much as Hester is its mother, and you have as much right to govern in the sickroom as she has; really her manner to me just now was quite wanting in common sense.”

“Just the quality I consider Hester so very gifted in.”

His mother shrugged her shoulders.

“What has come over you, Frederic? Three years ago you used almost always to see things as I did; now, perhaps, you consider it right for your wife to insult your mother in her own house.”

“Mother! you know I could not,” he said, affectionately drawing her arm through his; “but even if poor Hester has been a little abrupt and hasty with you, you will excuse it I know; she is so over-wrought and anxious that I can only wonder at her calmness. I know this morning, after my last night’s watch, I was nervous and excitable enough to quarrel with any one.”

“Oh, your wife said nothing, but I consider that at least she should have answered me. She only looked at me in that hard, cold, reproving way she can when she chooses, and pointed to the door—pointed so steadily and determinedly, that I was obliged to leave the room. It was not proper behaviour from a daughter towards a mother, Frederic,” and Mrs. Hallam hid her eyes with her handkerchief.

If he had not been a dutiful son, he might, perhaps, have thought it scarcely kind behaviour in his mother to upbraid him with Hester’s conduct when he was so torn and depressed with anxiety for little Ralphie; but he had learned so to long for affection, and by nature he was so peaceful, that he only felt sorry his mother and his wife should have come into collision; and a little judicious soothing, and an assurance that probably the child was restless, and therefore she feared he might be disturbed, smoothed Mrs. Hallam’s offended—not dignity, because she really had none that was real—but the pretension which supplied its place, and prevented her from lecturing her son as she had intended.

She had only stayed at Uplands once before, and that was during Hester’s absence—Frederic Hallam shrank from exposing his domestic unhappiness—so that with her remembrance of the former terms on which they lived, Mrs. Hallam had been greatly struck by the marked change in Hester’s manner to her husband, even in the slight opportunity she had had of seeing them

together. Nor only to her husband ; she seemed to rule all with a quiet firm hand, to which they submitted implicitly. Parkins was now head nurse, but although the same managing despotic person towards her fellow servants, she was a changed being in her manner towards her mistress ; perhaps she was the best proof of Hester's strength of purpose. Most girls would have chosen to dismiss a servant who had given herself "airs," and might have an inconvenient remembrance of the difficulty her mistress had found in fitting herself to her new state of life ; but Hester recognized Parkin's talents, and real worth, and probably thought that the surest way of silencing any gossip about herself and her husband, was to attach her interests so firmly to theirs as to make her wish to remain with them. All this Mrs. Hallam saw, and she grew more and more puzzled. She had fully intended to speak seriously to her son on the subject of being ruled by his wife, but for the present he had averted what would have been a trying discussion. She resolved to watch them very closely when Ralphie was better, and to write to Martha Hallam and ask her advice.

CHAPTER VI.

A VOW.

HALLAM smiled sadly to himself after his mother went into the house. He had often asked her question mentally, and being persuaded that no one could help loving Ralphie, thought it was a part of his wife's contradictory nature, or rather her determination, not to sympathize with him in any way, that she showed so little love for their child. If Ralphie had seemed fonder of his mother, he would have thought she petted him when he was not by ; but the child's preference for his father was too evident, and yet if Hallam had been a deeper thinker, or what would have served the same purpose, had accustomed himself to analyze as well as to observe human nature, he might have known that the true secret of Ralphie's preference besides the instinctive knowledge children have of those who love children, was the difference of their natures. The child resembled his mother as much in mind as in body, and consequently the same qualities had power over his affections.

Hallam probably could scarcely have said when he first began

to love Hester—but he was learning every day, more and more deeply, how closely united was his love for his wife and child—it would have been impossible now to tell which he loved in the other. He wandered into the stableyard, then out through the arched entrance, and over the bridge on to the grass in front of the avenue.

But he turned sharply away as he remembered the last time he had played there with Ralphie. What would he give to have his darling for one half-hour again? and then came the unspeakable agony—the dread which makes the strongest man's courage fail—that the hand of Death was on his child. For the little fellow had been very weak all day, and the London doctor, who had come down again to see him, had said that a few hours would decide the result of his illness: he would either sink or rally.

It has often been said before—and yet in his own experience each seems to realize, for the first time—how much harder any cross, any anxiety is to bear when it involves a necessity for passive resignation. There was nothing to be done for Ralphie, absolutely nothing the doctor had said, but to hope for the best. And this nothing seemed to Frederic Hallam so very hard to bear as he walked beside the moat which, still bounded by the picturesque low wall before mentioned, extended for some distance along the whole range of fruit and vegetable gardens, and turning in a sharp angle at their furthest extremity, followed their course round two other sides till it again reached the front, where a dry grassed ditch took its place.

The ground at the farthest boundary of the fruit gardens was rugged, and broken into little steeps and hollows, overgrown with gorse and brake. In some places, where the upper ground had evidently crumbled away, the hollows were deeper, clothed at the bottom with soft green turf, while at the top the rough edges of bright yellow gravel were fringed with that peculiarly long fine grass one only finds on commons. The heather and ling were just beginning to put out fresh green shoots, and in some places the ling had a few early blossoms; but the purple wealth of an August common was wanting; the hedge-rows and meadows are doubtless richest in flowers in April and May, but there is no time like autumn for the heathland, with its glorious contrasts of colour.

It was all alike to Hallam as he walked along, his hands clasped listlessly behind him, his head bent on his breast.

Suddenly the brake rustled beside him, and in another moment something rough and warm pressed against his hands, and then Bevis's cold nose was thirst searchingly into them.

The creature had been restless and uneasy from the day he had missed Ralphie, and more than once had refused to accompany his master on a walk, turning back continually as if in search of his little companion. He would spend hours on the grass where they usually played, snuffing all about and trying to find the scent in each direction, then, standing baffled for an instant, would begin again as unweariedly as ever. But to-day he seemed in a different mood; he walked quietly beside Hallam, his long ears drooping and his head depressed; his master turned presently and looked at him.

"Poor old dog, you miss Ralphie, don't you, Beewee?"

Either the child's name or the father's sad face as he pronounced the dog's pet title refreshed his memory, and Bevis laid himself down at Hallam's feet, and uttered that prolonged melancholy sound which only a bloodhound can give tongue to. It seemed to Hallam like the death-wail of his child. Hitherto he had borne up bravely, for one of his impressionable temperament. However, as the quinquina tree is always found in low unhealthy places, so those who are the most impressionable, are, by God's mercy, the most sanguine also.

It seems to be the lot of strong enduring natures, like Hester's, to look on the black side of things, to take any short cut, however gloomy and dreary, to meet evil half way, while a buoyant spirit will go a long way round to avoid it, if by so doing he can keep on a broad sunshiny road.

But when the dog raised his head and looked in his face, his large mournful eyes filled with tears, Hallam could bear up no longer; he was standing on the brink of one of the hollows, and turning from the dog, he plunged suddenly down it, and throwing himself on the turf, burst into an agony of grief.

The dog did not come to comfort his master, perhaps he thought it right that all should lament for Ralphie; he stood still, his head and long ears drooping almost to the ground; but when, after a while, exhausted by the violence of his grief, Hallam raised himself and looked round, the creature came quietly and licked his hands in quite a different way from his usual lordly behaviour—for Bevis was not playful or gentle with any one but Ralphie; but in such sorrow as Hallam's, the outpouring of a heart which could no longer bear its burden, he wanted perfect solitude, and

Bevis, finding his advances disregarded, withdrew again from the hollow, and walked slowly away among the bracken.

“Why was this sorrow sent him?”—we ask this question sometimes in impatience, but how often the answer comes like a revelation.

Here in this wild solitude, with nothing to distract his concentrated sense, through eye or ear, except such sights and sounds as were too familiar to disturb him, Hallam sat as if waiting for a reply.

And then as none came, his evil angels crowded round, and, unconscious of his prompters, he told himself it was very hard that every joy should be dashed away, just as he was ready to drink it. It had been the same with Hester, just as he had found out her good qualities, and could soon have brought himself to love her—for had he not loved her, spite of all?—she had learned to despise him; and, after all, he went on proudly, there was nothing to despise in him now; how different his life had been since Ralphie's birth, and since he had come to Uplands. But what if the child died? His friend the rector—Frederic had not reckoned him up among his good influences, although he often said to others, what a happy thing it was to have among them a man who lived up to so high a standard as Edward King—had told him that very morning, after he had paid his daily visit to the sick room, that he ought to prepare himself for the worst; and that if Ralphie were taken away, it would be in love and not in anger. Hallam's heart rebelled against this; he was no hypocrite; he said he could not be resigned to such a loss. He knew that Ralphie was the firm ground to which were anchored, and kept from shipwreck, all his good purposes, all his new-found unselfishness and forbearing endurance of his wife's conduct, and more than this, all his repentance for his former worldly life and deeds. If Ralphie were taken, he must drift away back among the breakers and be lost; he could see only a life of sin and sorrow before him, if his darling died.

But although at times the best of us may thus be tempted by the specious clouds which thrust themselves between our souls and their true light; if we have really prayed and tried to live well, instead of being content with good intentions, we shall not be left to the mercy of our invisible enemies.

Hallam sat still thinking, or rather trying to think, in that hard, dry-minded state, when every faculty becomes sullen and debased; and it seems impossible that warmth and love to either

God or man can ever revisit the heart. A torpor appeared to be creeping over his limbs also.

He rose to his feet, and as he did so, there was a tremulous movement in the green cushion on which he had been lying. Hundreds of tiny white and yellow flowers, streaked with purple, raised their fragile heads again, and looked up to heaven as brightly as before, as if in thankfulness for their release. Even through the midst of his gloom, the remembrance came to Hallam that he had heard of this little flower, and how brightly it always up-sprung after a weight that would have destroyed the life of many; he stooped and gathered some, and then slowly left the hollow. His heart swelled in the wider, freer atmosphere, and as he looked at the little eye-bright again, and remembered what Ralphie's delight would have been to find it, the weight was lifted, and tears once more filled his eyes, but they brought soothing with them. He sank down on his knees; if *nothing* could be done for Ralphie by mere human aid, was not prayer far more efficient than any mortal care could be? He prayed earnestly that the child might be restored to him, and then in the very prayer itself, as if fearing he was asking too much, he added, if God so willed.

And as the charmed circle in which he knelt widened, and the evil shadows withdrew with frowning baffled faces, his mind grew each moment clearer, and he saw truly that Ralphie was not the rock on which he trusted; he was rather the anchor which held him fast to the better land, the beacon which had been in mercy shown, to lead him on by its borrowed light. And what was his repentance worth, if it had not brought him to acknowledge that he owed an atonement for past offences; and if this were to be his destined punishment, ought *he* to struggle and rebel, he who was growing each day more and more keenly alive to the besetting infirmities of his nature? But try as he would, he was only human; the sharp agony came again, the unutterable longing that he might have this one blessing spared to him; and amid this came also a more searching question—what if Ralphie were to be taken away for his own sake, from parents who could not live lovingly together? It was a startling question, but the answer followed rapidly. If it were not right for Ralphie to witness such a life, could it be right in God's eyes? Was it safe to live it? Could he ever tell himself he had truly repented of the past, till he had made atonement for it? Till this morning he had well-nigh forgotten how black that Past had been. Then,

in turning over an old pocket-book, he had found, in an inner pocket, hidden out of sight, the agreement written by himself for Goldsmith to sign. He had shrunk with horror at the discovery of such baseness; but for this written witness, he would not have believed he could have meditated such treachery.

Now he drew the paper forth, and tearing it in pieces, scattered it to the wind, and with bowed head and clasped hands solemnly there, on the lonely heath, Frederic Hallam vowed that if Ralphie were once spared to him, he would humble his pride to the very dust in seeking a reconciliation with his wife.

Tea was waiting when he returned. Hester had sent down word that she should not leave her charge even for a moment, and he found his mother quite uneasy and fidgety at his long absence as he passed from the lawn through the open library window on his way upstairs.

He paused at Ralphie's door, and listened before he entered; a large screen hid him, and he had opened the door noiselessly. There was a sound of lamentation within the room, his first impulse was to rush forward, fearing some evil to Ralphie; but Hester's voice, in broken, agonized tones, restrained him; it seemed as if he dared not break suddenly in upon her sorrow.

"Oh, my child, my boy!" he heard indistinctly murmured, as if she were smothering the sound on his pillow, "shall I lose you just when I love you best? Oh, how can I bear it?"

And then came a sobbing silence. It seemed to Hallam that he had been specially led there—that now was the moment of reunion; but he would not intrude on her suddenly: the singular outburst from one so reserved and guarded as Hester, had never been meant to be overheard, and she should not be wounded by his knowledge of it.

He leant against the door, and, turning the handle more loudly than usual, entered the room slowly from behind the screen.

Had his ears deceived him? Hester sat beside the little bed, with the same cold, passionless face she always wore in his presence. For an instant his soul shrank back; how could he tempt a quarrel (for any overture on his part had hitherto provoked bitter words) beside his dying child?

But what had he just vowed? He went up to Hester, he saw her eyes were swollen with weeping, and tried to take her hand; coldly, slowly, she withdrew it, and rising moved away from Ralphie's bed, beckoning her husband to follow her.

"I am not very tired, thank you," she said, in what she wished to be a softened manner, but which the strong restraint she maintained rendered painfully repelling. "I do not wish to leave him for an instant; both nurses are within call; I will send for you directly there is a change."

"I cannot leave him now," said Hallam, cut to the heart by her evident wish for his absence, when he thought they might each so have supported the other.

"Then we must not speak," she said, simply; "the slightest shock to the brain now would be fatal."

CHAPTER VII.

MARTHA HALLAM AT STEDDING.

THE wonder of the Misses Skipper was at its height. Miss Hallam had arrived at the rectory, and had been seen to bow to Mrs. Wrenshaw and her daughter as they came out of church on Sunday morning. What was going to happen next? Was this family difference—the favourite source of lamentation with Miss Jemima and her sisters; in fact, so stock a topic, that I scarcely know how they would have enjoyed the last three years as they had done, without it—"was this," as Miss Jemima in her happy choice of words would certainly have said, "going to become a thing of the past?" and I am afraid a disappointed feeling crept over the minds of the three ladies, for, if a reconciliation were to take place between the Hallams and the Bonhams, there would be no blame to attach anywhere—no possibility of echoing and re-echoing those two favourite sentences, "There are always faults on both sides," and "One story is good till another is told."

If they had known Martha Hallam better, they would have thought her courtesy still more surprising: it was so foreign to her whole character and the nature of her prejudices to seek fresh acquaintance. What had served her father and mother before her would do for her; nothing would persuade her that society—in other words fellowship with fellow men and women—would not involve what she pleased to call "the levelling principle;" if she could only have submitted the crooked corners and angles of her mind—which had been allowed from childhood to grow unmolested until they had become distortions—to the lathe

of contradiction and contrary opinion—which can only be administered advantageously to such a temper as hers in mixed society, from the self-control the presence of strangers enforces on the most wilful—many new and interesting thoughts, infinite enjoyment of the mind and talents, and, above all, the sympathies and affections of others might have been opened to Martha Hallam; but, moving thus in one narrow special circle of friends, who all knew her too well to contradict her openly, although they probably laughed at her behind her back, she kept to her original creed, that she and all belonging immediately to her were infallible, and in only believing what she chose to believe.

But she had some Popes, some few privileged individuals from whom to promulgate the “they say,” which has such mighty power over the credulous many, and the Ainsworths were among these.

Therefore when Mrs. Ainsworth told her of the high estimation in which she, her husband, and indeed all the Stedding people held Mr. and Mrs. Bonham, she remembered that she was in some way connected with these favoured people, and that it would be well to distinguish them by her notice; hence had come the greeting witnessed by Miss Jemima and her sisters, and hence also a dignified acquiescence when Mrs. Ainsworth suggested they should call on Mrs. Bonham.

“I think it would be only kind. I know poor Mrs. Bonham has felt very much the estrangement from her cousin; you could tell her a good deal about her, of course. It is not your place to call first,” she continued, for, although good and charitable to the poor, the wife of the rector of Stedding was a formal and rigid exacter and renderer of ceremonial duties, for the neglect of which she frequently reprimanded her far more liberal-minded husband, “but, with this coldness in the family, Mrs. Bonham would scarcely like to call.”

“I should think not,” said Miss Hallam, drawing up her prim figure with an emphasis perfectly understood by her companion; it said, as plainly as words could do, by implication, “I should like to see a mere country doctor’s wife calling on ME, Martha Hallam, of London.”

“And,” Mrs. Ainsworth went on, “as, perhaps, she may wish to ask you many questions entirely relating to family matters, I shall just introduce you, and then call for you again in half an hour’s time, that is, if you would like such an arrangement.”

“ Well, it might be as well ; there are one or two things I should like to say to this Mrs. Bonham.”

It had come into her busy brain that there might, after all, be some communication between the cousins : she would not believe that any woman would so completely alienate herself from those among whom she lived, as, from Mrs. Hallam’s account, Hester persisted in doing, unless she had some other object on which to bestow her affections. She felt very angry with her niece just now. On hearing of Ralphie’s illness, she had at once written to ask if she should not go down and assist in nursing him ; and Fred, her own darling nephew, for whom she had done so much, had been made by his wife—she was sure it was no voluntary act on his part—to send her a polite, though decided refusal.

It was incredible ! her assistance had never been refused before ; she was such an excellent nurse, so well accustomed to children ; well, they might ask long enough before she took the pains to revisit Uplands. She had forgiven Fred ; it was not his fault, of course, except that he ought not to be ruled by his wife ; but when Mrs. Hallam’s letter came confirming the last idea, and speaking of the change in Fred’s spirits, Martha felt strongly moved to journey to Uplands at once, and remonstrate with the young wife on her husband’s want of cheerfulness. However, after all—for Louisa was extremely fanciful—it might be the natural depression caused by the little boy’s anxious state, not that she believed him in danger, oh, dear, no ! mothers and grandmothers always exaggerated childish complaints ; it was just a feverish cold, as the doctor had said at first. Of course, if they would make a fuss, and send for a London doctor, the poor man was obliged to say something to earn his fee, and the more danger he created in imagination, the greater would be the merit of the cure.

“ Just the way with all doctors,” as she remarked to Mrs. Bonham, in giving her an account of the matter without at all considering her inadvertence.

She had been agreeably surprised in Lucy ; she had not in any way expected to see, as she afterwards expressed it, “ so pretty and tasteful a little woman,” and the neat, well-ordered house, and pretty, simply-dressed children, whom she met just returning from their walk, clad in brown-holland skirts and jackets, so that they might scramble after wild flowers, were all duly appreciated by one who fully valued the “ nicenesses ” of life.

Lucy received her courteously, but with none of the flutter she expected her appearance would create, and if she did feel nervous inwardly, it was not at Miss Hallam's high and mighty condescension in calling, but because she was at last going to hear news of her absent cousin.

She was greatly disappointed to find that she was expected rather to give information than to receive it.

"I have not seen my niece, Mrs. Frederick Hallam, for a very long time; she is a fine, tall, elegant young woman. I should rather say, perhaps, gives promise of elegance, but she is very abrupt: was she always abrupt, Mrs.—I beg your pardon—I always forget your name."

Lucy smiled; perhaps she thought it a pity Miss Hallam should forget the name of the person she was speaking to.

"My cousin Hester had always a reserved manner. She thinks a great deal more than most people do."

"Ah! she is your cousin, you know; of course you think a good deal of her; but I should have said from her manner that she had seen very little society before marriage."

She had underrated Lucy's intelligence; like lightning flashed on her quick perceptions that the purport of this visit was to discover Hester's antecedents; she thought she began to see why her cousin had broken with her own family; if her surmise were correct, at any rate, Miss Hallam should get no satisfaction from her.

"We were a good deal together before marriage," she said, quietly, "and were always great friends. How do you like Stedding?"

And each time Miss Hallam returned to the charge, she managed to evade her inquiries, and yet with such quiet courtesy that her visitor, though feeling inwardly foiled, could not really have any cause of complaint against her.

There was something that attracted her, spite of herself, in Lucy; she was so lively, and seemed to take the same cheerful view of things that she herself did. She almost felt inclined to confide in her, and tell her that Fred was no longer happy with her cousin; but then she remembered that her sister-in-law had distinctly said in her letter that he was fonder of his wife than ever, and would not hear a word against her. She could not bring herself to own to Hester's cousin that Fred's happiness was dependent on his wife's love; no, Martha Hallam's creed for husbands and wives was, that no love could be sufficient for a

wife to give to her husband, and in return she ought to be thankful and content with any crumbs of affection he might deign to throw over his left shoulder, supposing, of course, the man to be a Hallam.

The half hour slipped away while she was still undecided, and Lucy was eagerly showing her baby and expatiating on its health, skin, number of teeth, and other perfections in which young mothers claim universal sympathy from womankind, and Lucy was very enthusiastic on the topic, when in came Jacob Bonham.

He walked straight up to his wife and kissed her ; he had not seen her since breakfast time, and he and Lucy had always kept up lover-like ways. But when he turned round as Lucy introduced him to Miss Hallam, and held out his hand to her, she seemed to be afraid that the operation was about to be repeated on herself, her face puckered into a most reproving aspect, and, keeping her hands firmly pressed together, she merely bent stiffly in answer to his greeting.

Lucy could scarcely help laughing ; but Jacob came to her assistance.

" I passed Mrs. Ainsworth and your mother walking together, Lucy," he said ; " I think they will be here soon."

Almost as he spoke came Mrs. Wrenshaw's short imperative knock, and, full of bustle and smiles, rosy health and eager curiosity, she ushered her companion into the drawing-room.

Miss Hallam tried to keep her at a distance by stately courtesy ; it was quite enough to shake hands with the Bonhams : but really this person, no relation of Hester's, only her aunt by marriage, was more than she felt called on to tolerate. But Mrs. Wrenshaw was not to be awed ; with her happy, insensitive nature she quite omitted to receive what Miss Hallam's silence and coldness were intended to convey ; she thought the poor lady was shy at finding herself among strangers, and only laboured the harder to entertain her while Mrs. Ainsworth, Jacob and Lucy were talking parish business.

" I declare, ma'am, I thought we were never to have the pleasure of seeing you ; I am so glad we've met ; it seems so much more Christian-like, in every way, for connections to be friendly together. I'm sure I scarcely know, though," she went on, " the exact degree of relationship between you and me, Miss Hallam ; let me see, I'm Mrs. Frederic Hallam's aunt, and you are Mr. Frederic Hallam's aunt ; can you make it out, I can't.

It comes to a something, but I don't know what." And she burst into a fit of laughter.

"No," said Miss Hallam, shaking her head grimly, and feeling that she could not possibly tolerate such freedom, "I do not see that I have the honour of being in any way connected with you, madam. Mrs. Ainsworth," she said, rising, "I fear we are taking up Mrs. Bonham's valuable time," and, managing to escape Mrs. Wrenshaw's proffered hand in the general farewell that followed, she departed with her friend, feeling that she had been grievously insulted by Hester's vulgar aunt by marriage.

"What a nice pleasant-spoken person Miss Hallam is!" said poor unconscious Mrs. Frank to her daughter; "painfully shy though: she quite makes grimaces from nervousness."

CHAPTER VIII.

BIZ AT UPLANDS.

HESTER sat alone in her own study, a handsomely furnished room, but with little about it to betray female habitation.

There were books, but they were chiefly educational or philosophical volumes, a few of the heavier magazines, strong substantial-looking writing materials, and several brass-clasped account-books—for Hester regularly overlooked her bailiff's accounts; her husband had offered to relieve her from this charge, but she declined his assistance; he had the garden and flowers and the gardeners' expenses to control, she said, it was well for her to have an occupation also.

She sat now at her writing-table with an open letter before her. It was from Miss Hallam, and had arrived that morning, enclosed in one to her mother-in-law.

Wordy, ill-expressed, and diffuse, it yet seemed to possess wonderful power over Hester. She read it, and read it again, and each time was plunged into deeper thought than before.

She was pale and thin from her constant nursing, but still there was a slight flush on her cheek, and a light in her eyes, that spoke rather of pleasurable than of painful anticipation.

And was this description a true picture of Lucy's lot? Lucy, whose affectionate letter, written to congratulate her on her child's birth, she had treated with indifference as an overture to recon-

ciliation, simply because she was rich and because Mr. Bonham thought it wise for his wife to be friends with her wealthy cousin. From her own experience of it, Hester so hated poverty that it was impossible to her to imagine others could be happy unless they were rich; now, as she read her aunt's minute description of this bright, loving, happy home, a keen feeling of jealousy rose in her heart.

"She always was happier than I; she had a kind mother, a good education, and all she wished for, and now she has a husband and children who love her; it is unjust she should have every blessing in the world."

The last words calmed her. Her aunt's letter did not say that Lucy was rich in what the world calls blessings. She said the house was neat but very simply furnished, and that the chief ornaments in the drawing-room were a few of Lucy's own sketches, some pretty books, and a profusion of flowers. Miss Hallam had taken delight in saying all this, as her niece's want of taste in arrangement and minor details had been a very sore point with her, knowing how Fred cared about such things. "People can *not* be really happy without money," argued Hester; "it is all very well now, but when Lucy has six children instead of three, how are they to be clothed, and fed, and educated, if means are so scanty now?"

So people are apt to argue who have little practical faith in God's goodness, and who cannot believe that to those who implicitly trust in His love, using, of course, to the full extent, every talent He has bestowed, the burden will never press too heavily—as their day, so will their strength be.

But Hester saw only the black side.

Poor Lucy would in time become a mere drudge. Even the affection her aunt described so minutely would not compensate for such incessant daily toil. Hester's heart had hardened during this long abstinence, for, in resolving not to love her husband or believe in him again, she forgot that she deliberately nourished Revenge, and any one deadly sin is never satisfied to be shut up in the soul alone, but soon calls his fellows around him, and Self-Love first of all.

But still she was not satisfied with her own argument. She took the letter up and read it again; this time more carefully than ever, and when she came to the description of Lucy's smile when her husband entered, and the light that sparkled in her eyes—for Miss Hallam declared that she seemed quite another

creature in his presence—(although, for her part, she thought he was too affectionate to be quite gentlemanlike,) Hester clasped her hands fervently together, and wished that she had not married a gentleman, or, at any rate, that her husband had loved her.

“And did he not love her now?”

This was a question that had first forced itself upon her in the solitude of her child's sick-room, dating from that night—burnt into her memory—when the fever reached its crisis, and when, returning from his lonely ramble on the heathland, Hallam's eyes had told his wife far more than her repelling manner had allowed him to speak.

She had seen little of him since then. The crisis favourably passed, the child's progress towards recovery had been singularly rapid, and his father had insisted on sleeping in his room, and spending a great part of each day with him. Hester was ordered complete rest, and as much air as possible—the confinement had tried her severely, and, although she would not own it, she felt weak and languid.

She rode or drove the greater part of each day, and Mrs. Hallam generally accompanied her, so that she rarely saw her husband alone.

But if he did love her—what then? could she ever love or trust him again—the man who had taught her the sad reality of falsehood under the most sacred form of love? No. It was impossible. Hester had not knowingly been acting a part all this time. She told her husband she despised him, and she told herself so till she believed it; or, perhaps, it is more true to her nature to say that she willed to despise him, and therefore she did so. She had accustomed herself ever since that fatal revulsion of feeling, when scales seemed suddenly to have dropped from her eyes, to look upon him as a mere frivolous man of fashion, without any reading or mental resources in which she could sympathize; his love for flowers was to her childish, as day by day she plunged deeper into abstruse and philosophical studies—all lighter pursuits became trivial and unworthy of anything so exalted as a cultivated human intellect. Intellect—that is to say, intellect in the shape of learning and acquirements—was the idol she worshipped even more than wealth. If her husband read anything it was only a novel, or some equally trifling book.

Hester considered that there was far greater talent in laborious historical or biographical compilations, with, perhaps, scarce twenty pages of original composition, than in the most brilliant

creations of genius. She had none of the Divine Gift within her, and she could not understand its value, or distinguish between it and the pains-taking plodding of second or third-rate talent, and wherever this gift, or the power of appreciating it, is entirely wanting, there is sure to be a narrowness of mind and judgment, and harsh opinion of others. Those whose lively imagination sharpens their sense of ridicule, may laugh at their neighbours, but they rarely judge their motives severely, or fancy they understand the workings of their brother's mind better than he does himself.

Hester was surprised at herself to-day when the question of her husband's love had first presented itself. She had not believed in his previous steady quiet life, looking on it merely as the result of necessity, as, since his father's legacy to him had been realized, he could expect no further assistance till his mother died. She had still said to herself she did not believe in it. She had grown used to her own solitary unloving existence, she hated change, and scenes, and explanations; besides, it would be worse than ever if, after a reconciliation, she found herself, as she fully believed she should do, unable to respect him sufficiently to return his love. But this picture of Lucy and Jacob haunted her; why should they have a happiness superior to hers? surely, however weak he might be, Frederic—she never called him Fred now—was equal to Jacob Bonham, and surely she was superior to Lucy. She stopped here suddenly. What part did Lucy seem to have in this happiness; there was no word in aunt Martha's letter of the young wife's talents, or learning, or prudence, or even housewifely skill, although, perhaps, what was said in praise of the children's appearance might hint at that, and yet her aunt said distinctly that Hester would be glad to hear how happy Lucy made her husband, and what a pattern wife she was. How could aunt Martha know this? And then came the description of the joy they seemed to feel in each other's presence. She wondered if Frederic felt happier in hers—was *she* glad if he came unexpectedly into her study? No; she was not, and her absent look and constrained manner always told him he was unwelcome.

And yet, how or why she scarcely knew, ever since those lonely watches during Ralphie's illness, when the sick-room had been kept so darkened that she could not plunge herself for resource against inward conviction into her favourite studies, her thoughts had dwelt much upon her husband, and she had awakened to the perception of what she might have known long before, had

she not resolutely excluded him from her thoughts as well as from her affections—that he was an entirely changed man.

But the fearful doubt begot of her father's suspicious nature, which for awhile her new belief in human love had lulled asleep, rebuked her sharply for her weakness, and whispered to her softening heart that all this was unreal, and that if, after having been once wilfully deceived, she should be so weak-minded as to trust her husband again, he would take advantage of it to ruin the fortune which Mr. Goldsmith assured her, with care, she might yet bequeath to her child.

Troubled with these conflicting thoughts, she could not settle to anything this morning; she felt angry with herself that the chatter of a foolish person like aunt Martha should so disturb her.

There was a tap at the door, for her study was not to be rashly invaded, and Parkins entered.

She had grown into a comely, stout, kindly-looking woman; probably country air and good health had aided in softening her temper.

She was smiling now as if she bore good news.

"If you please, ma'am, there's an old woman come from Stedding; she says her business is only with you, and I was to say her name was Biz."

To Parkins's surprise, the colour rose in her mistress's face, and then she turned so white that the woman thought she was ill, and advanced towards her.

"No, I am not faint," said Hester, controlling herself with all the strength of her stubborn will. "I believe," she went on, "you were right, Parkins, in what you said this morning; I want change of air; the least thing startles me. Bring the old woman here, and bring her something to eat—yourself, mind."

Parkins looked inquisitive, but she said nothing, and left the room.

Hester sank back in her chair.

What was all this? was it her destiny forcing her onward along a new path she had never intended to tread; just as long-crushed-back feelings seemed striving to lift their bruised heads and put forth fresh shoots of hope and love, to have this witness of all her early days and feelings for her husband thrust upon her; for she knew how closely the old woman had watched her in the first days of her acquaintance with Hallam; and in Lucy's absence at the time of her father's death, and of Hallam's frequent visits to Kirton's Farm, Biz had been her only confidant.

Before the estrangement between herself and her husband, when she still cherished the vain hope that Kirton's Farm would be their future home, she had often written to the old servant; but when Lucy's silence had made her shrink from exposing her unhappiness to one who no longer cared for her, she had determined to efface as far as possible all former recollections from her mind, and contented herself with sending Biz her quarterly remittance with a mere formal paper, to which the old woman was to affix her mark.

She could not imagine what had brought her to Uplands.

When Parkins reappeared, before Hester spoke to her visitor, she desired that she might not be disturbed for the next three hours—even by Mr. Hallam.

Biz, wonderfully smartened up externally since we saw her at Kirton's Farm, stood looking at her in open-mouthed surprise.

"You hardly know me, I see," said Hester, smiling and holding out her hand; "but I don't find you much changed, Elizabeth."

"Call me Biz, Muss Heaster, if it be yeself as is growed so fine and stately. Ere-a-mussy, the first look I ketched on ye, I thought 'twur the queen sheself a-looking so tall and so grand; and how do 'ee find yeself, muss, now ye've growed so great? It be a long bit since I seed ye. Yo looks a bit pale though."

Not a shade more of reverence than in the old kitchen at Kirton's Farm. Biz was hungry, and therefore querulous after her long journey, moreover, she considered that she ought to have been asked to Uplands long ago.

"I am not quite so well as usual, and my little boy has just recovered from a serious illness. You shall see him presently."

"Well, I be a bit curious to see he, sure enough; but it baint he as I be comed all this way to see; it's your muster, Muss Heaster. Him and I wur allus good friends, ye mind."

The words grated. It was so long since she had deferred, even in thought, to her husband, that she coloured with anger at the old woman's words.

"You had better have something to eat."

But Biz went on.

"I'll just tell 'ee a bit that's in my mind fust. There wur a meddlesome old body in Stedding last week, or I baint sure I 'ood a comed; but I says to her I wanted to see your muster, and she tells me I mustn't think o' such a thing as going to Uplands, and that it 'ood be resumpshus, she says."

“Who did you say?” asked Hester. It was a deep mortification to think that perhaps Biz had told the history of her first acquaintance with her husband to Martha Hallam—far worse that his family should know how she had loved him than that they should become acquainted with her early poverty and rough ways, although she also shrank from that as a sort of disgrace now.

“Why, she said she wur yer muster’s aunt, Muss Heaster. I was comin’ along street, and who should I see but Madam Ainsworth, the parson’s lady, and a tall sart a scrag of a maypole wi’ her, and she says, ‘Here’s some one, Mrs. Black, as knows yer niece,’ and the other tossed up her head, for all the world like a fidgety horse when the flies settle on him, and says she, ‘I am the aunt of Mr. Hallam.’ Ye’d ha’ thought that she meant the Sultan o’ Chinee or the Pope o’ Rome to see the way she had. So I says, ‘Oh, be you, ma’am? then it’s like enough you can tell I where he bides just now.’ ‘At Uplands, of course,’ she says, and she looked as if she thought I’d no call to ask questions. But you know as well as I, Muss Heaster, it bean’t the cock as crows the loudest as has the longest spurs or the best dunghill to scratch at; so, says I, for I knew she was nou’t but a stranger, so she’d no rights nor titles over I in Stedding, says I, ‘Is Muster Hallam to be found at Uplands easy like?’ This seemed to set she over; she hustled and rustled sheself about like a peacock spreading out his tail i’ the sun, and she says, ‘I’m sure I can’t say, my good ’ooman; it’s no business o’ yourn, nor mine neather, that I can see,’ and off she went. Now, you see, Muss Heaster, as I said afore, I bean’t coomed to see you—ye’ve never asked I so to do,” and the old ill-used look Hester so well remembered came back like a heavy cloud, “but I coomed to see that handsome-faced young gentleman as used always to have a kind word for I in them ould times at Kirton’s Farm. I’ve got pettickler business to speak to he about.”

Hester smiled at Biz’s story, but, oh, how her voice and words brought the old days back!

“Well, you shall see him presently.” She wondered in her own mind what this business could be that had induced Biz to incur such a fatigue and expense. “Now, Biz, you must eat something.”

A hearty meal, and a glass of wine, did wonders. Biz at last softened, and even said Hester had grown “a finer creetur” than she ever expected. She fully confirmed Miss Hallam’s account of Lucy’s happiness.

"Ere-a-mussy, Muss Heaster—ye see, it'll allus be Muss Heaster, I be too old to change ways—thay two be like a pair o' lovers, thay be," said the old woman. "It's too sunshiny, though, to last, I say. I don't hold wi' a man being allus petted and humoured up in all his ways till he thinks hisself the cock o' the yard; not I: he'd maybe think twice as good of she if she wur harder to please."

"But isn't he kind to her, then?" said Hester, with a sort of lingering hope that the bitter drop might be the same in all married life, although differently developed.

"Kind! why didn't I tell 'ee thay wur a pair o' lovers? What I means is, that husbands and wives should foller the reg'lar rule. Thay wur never meant, at least none as I've seen, to live in peace and quietness. Your father and mother didn't, I can tell 'ee, Muss Heaster, and she was a good sort o' wife, and yet he was allus having words about summat or other. I wonder how it is wi' you and your muster?" she said, looking hard at her, as Hester's colour rose. "Ere-a-mussy! how fond you used to be o' he, and how, when you 'spected he down, you used to walk to and fro, to and fro along the lane till he coomed in sight. I be bound now," she added, "you've tired on he a'ready, and it's a shame, muss, if so you be, for he's a real gentleman wi' his heart i' the right place. That sweet smile o' his'n did me allus good to see."

And then, to Hester's great surprise, she told the purport of her visit. In addition to the annual sum of thirty pounds a year which she received from Hester, Mr. Ainsworth had lately called on her and paid her ten pounds, which he said she would receive half-yearly from Mr. Hallam during his lifetime. She was not to take any notice of this to her neighbours, as Mr. Hallam did not want a fuss made about it; but Biz could not write, and she thought the pretext of thanking Mr. Hallam for his kindness, and making sure it was to continue, would enable her to carry out the plan she had so long cherished of visiting Uplands. It had been a sore trial to her pride to be always obliged to profess—when asked questions by former gossips—that she knew nothing about "Muss Heaster" since her marriage. Her anger at Hester's long silence had greatly overcome any affection she felt for her; but now that she saw how queen-like she looked, and what a grand place it was, it seemed to increase her own importance that she had once been Mrs. Hallam's only servant.

Hester could not believe she heard aright. After making Biz

repeat her story word for word, she rang the bell impetuously ; she would not stop an instant for thought, she must see her husband at once.

She was surprised to find how time had slipped by since the old woman's arrival ; even if she could have borne the fatigue, Biz could not return to Stedding till next morning.

In answer to her mistress's inquiries, Parkins said that Mr. Crathie had driven over, and had taken Mr. Hallam away with him, and that he said he should probably not return for a day or so. He had asked for Mrs. Hallam, but Parkins had told him she was not to be disturbed.

CHAPTER IX.

HOPE.

HESTER's love for her husband was not then so dead as she imagined ; she stood almost overpowered at the keen disappointment of finding that she could not at once thank him for his thoughtful kindness to her old servant ; nothing he could have done would have touched her as this did. She was unable to detect any double motive in it, and her heart swelled with pride as she thought of the change that must have taken place in her husband.

He must love her or he would not have done this ; and if he did, ought she not to try to love him ? but even if she did, would he believe her now ? She had repelled him too often ; she could not humble herself to risk a like repulse.

Feeling, emotion, passion, all seemed set free and struggling together in her heart and brain.

She scarcely listened to the old woman's delighted remarks on Ralphie when she took her to his nursery.

"The young muster favours 'ee most, Muss Heaster ; he's yur eyes as like as like ; not but what his father's face 'ood ha' shown uncommon well in a child, with his blue eyes and fresh cheeks. Is Muster Hallam as likely looking as he wur yon time he coomed to Kirton's Farm ?"

How vividly the words brought him back before her ; that evening when he had met her and Lucy in "the copse bit," when she had almost worshipped him and thought him made of different

clay to any human being she had ever seen before—could such a feeling ever return? No; it was but the illusion of extreme youth and ignorance, and she sighed deeply.

“Ere-a-mussy, Muss Heaster! what can ’ee have to sigh for, I’d like to know? ye as has got all ’ee wants without the asking, and ’ll this fine place be the young muster’s after you?” she said, turning from the sleepy child, for he had just been put to bed as they entered, and looking out over the park.

“No,” said Hester, slowly, as if struck by a sudden thought, “unless we purchase it; we only rent it now.”

“Ere-a-mussy! more’s the pity,” said Biz; but Hester made no answer.

She took the old woman back to her study, and went again and looked at Ralphie. He was in a sound healthy sleep already.

She sent the nurse into the next room, and sat down to think.

Did she wish, or did she not wish for a reconciliation with her husband?

Yes, she did wish it. In the first place it would be much better for Ralphie if his parents were of one mind. She did not expect, she dared not hope, they should ever be united in heart and affection, as Lucy and her husband were; the time for that had gone by; but she seemed suddenly to feel that she had nourished her resentment quite long enough, and that the time had come for showing her willingness to forget and forgive the past. She did not consider that she had anything to ask pardon for; her only difficulty was, how the reconciliation—she would not yet own to herself how she longed for it—was to be accomplished, without an awkwardness which might make matters worse.

But Biz’s question about Uplands had fired a new train of thought, impulse rather, which she felt constrained to act upon.

Why not purchase Uplands at once?—she knew how Fred longed for it—and present it to him as the first step towards a better life.

It was rare for Hester to take a sudden resolve; but this evening she seemed strangely carried out of herself. She looked at her boy, he seemed to smile in his sleep, as if approving her thought. She paused for some time longer, and then rang the nursery bell.

“Parkins, let old Mrs. Black sleep in the next room, and tell Françoise to be ready to start with me by the nine o’clock train

to London to-morrow. Master Ralph seems so well that I think I can trust him to you, especially as Mrs. Hallam is here. I shall return in the evening, if possible; if not, early next day."

Parkins looked electrified; but she knew her lady too well by this time to remonstrate; she took her revenge by ridiculing the transports of the French maid, who, after several months' confinement in what she called *cette campagne ennuyeuse*, rejoiced she was at last to accompany her mistress to London.

Mrs. Hallam received Hester's announcement with quiet displeasure. She had been left to herself all day far more than she considered right. Hester had just appeared for dinner-time, and had then returned to her room.

"Surely, Hester, you will not go to London without consulting your husband."

"I shall be home again before he is. I am going on business which cannot be delayed."

"Did Frederic know you were going?"

"No."

"I am really afraid he will think it very strange; however, I suppose you think you know best."

"I am sure I do." Hester resolutely took up a book as if to forbid further discussion; and her mother-in-law, feeling extremely ill-used and discontented, was afraid to urge her further.

Early next morning the same carriage took her and old Biz to the station, as there was a train going to Stedding soon after the London train's departure.

Hester had almost resolved to send an affectionate message to Lucy; but then she had sent none to her. Biz had not told anyone where she was going, for fear of being stopped. She did not tell her young mistress this, now that she had been favourably received by her.

If Hester had not been so pre-occupied, she might have wondered how Biz enjoyed the novel luxury of driving in a real carriage; but whatever the old woman felt, she was not going to betray any surprise or admiration; to recur to by-gones now would have lessened her own importance and Hester's.

Only when they were parting, she said,—

"Do ye reckon ever to see th'ould place again, Muss Heaster?"

"I don't know—I can't tell," said Hester, for she felt that she was on the verge of an enterprise which might change all the

tenor of her future; "but Biz, if I go near Stedding, I will manage to see you—now good-bye. I'm very glad I have seen you. I will tell Mr. Hallam you came to thank him."

Biz looked after her as the train glided out of sight. She admired her greatly, and could hardly believe her the same being whom she used to scold so freely in former times, for tearing holes in her gingham frocks; but somehow the fractious spirit of the old woman, always seeking for invisible wounds and scratches, felt aggrieved by the irresistible awe she felt in Hester's presence.

"She might ha' bid a body bide till she coomed back; maybe she wur feared I'd be telling o'-the Farm ways and such like, but she might ha' knowed I better; there be plenty to let 'ee down a peg, without setting yer own hand to the work."

As every station brought Hester nearer to London, she felt happier and lighter-hearted. A thrill of youthful impatience, long unknown, ran through her veins; her face had lost its habitually stern, self-controlled expression; she looked agitated, and yet more at peace with herself than she had done for some time past. And sundry terrors, common to weak womankind, but utterly foreign to her masculine temperament, now, as she drew near her journey's end, flitted through her mind. Suppose Mr. Goldsmith should be away, and that she should have to return to Uplands with her purpose unfulfilled; her determined will rose against such a delay to her impatience; he must be summoned back, let him be where he might. Something told her that nothing less than her own personal influence would decide him to so large a disbursement as the purchase-money of Uplands, and yet, looking at it in every way, it seemed to Hester that it was the wisest course to pursue. With her present feelings towards her husband, her property would surely be as safe in his hands as in those of a lawyer; and if she made Uplands his own, self-interest would urge him to improve the estate in every way. The next instant she blamed herself for the half doubt the last suggestion implied; and setting her foot firmly on the hound-like suspicions which had been so used to fosterage that they would scarcely be kept at a distance, she resolved to trust fully or not at all.

Most young women would probably have shrunk with timidity at the noise and bustle of a great London station, where there was no one to meet them, or to care for them; but Hester was fearless, and had unlimited confidence in the power of money. She did not leave anything to Françoise, but, beckoning a porter, and slipping something in his hand, was soon installed in a cab

with her, and on the way to the hotel they had stayed at, the last time they were in London.

Here she deposited Françoise, and then drove on to Mr. Goldsmith's office.

She was indignant with herself for being so uncollected and impatient; but try as she would, she could not refrain from imagining her husband's surprise and pleasure, when she told him what she had done; for she did not feel now as if she could wait as she had at first intended, till the title-deeds were engrossed. Lawyers were always so long and troublesome in all they had to do.

It surprised her to hear that Mr. Goldsmith was at home and disengaged. Accustomed to anticipate evil, it seemed as if all were going too smoothly for a good result to arise.

She shrank from seeing him; but for her unbounded confidence in her father's discernment, and her distrust of her husband, she would long ago have wished her affairs freed from his control.

She followed the clerk so closely that she entered as her name was announced. The lawyer started rather than rose from his chair, his pale face turning yellow and then almost leaden from surprise at the sight of his visitor. He looked behind him rapidly, first over one shoulder, then over the other, and finally burst into one of his fits of silent laughter.

"You must excuse me, my dear young lady, indeed you must; but—bless my soul," and he surveyed her with evident admiration, "I didn't expect a visit from so charming a lady."—She looked impatient, and no wonder; there are some men by whom it is not pleasant to women to be admired, although probably from long habit in the misuse of their eyes, they are all unconscious of giving offence, and the lawyer was one of these.—"I hope Mr. Hallam is well; is he in town?"

"No, I came up alone, to see you on a business matter."

"Ha, ha," he again laughed, for some time, taking refuge behind his pocket-handkerchief; "but why did you take the trouble, my dear lady? had you sent me a line I would have run down to Uplands with all the pleasure in life."

"That would not have served my purpose; I have private business with you, and I have no wish at present that Mr. Hallam should know anything about it."

The lawyer's face lengthened, and his flaccid double-chin waggled mournfully as he shook his head.

"Dear, dear, I regret extremely," he said, "I had hoped

——” and then he buried his face in his handkerchief, managing, however, to watch Hester’s face as he did so.

She looked haughty and displeased.

“There is no cause for regret, Mr. Goldsmith; I simply wish to make my husband a present, and don’t want him to know it beforehand, that is all.”

Goldsmith’s face twitched, and he again looked nervously over each shoulder, but he did not interrupt her; he seemed afraid of making another false move.

“We like Uplands so very much, and our friend Mr. Crathie, who constantly hears from Sir Rupert Joy, says he still is willing to sell it; therefore I shall be very glad if you will at once communicate with his agent and purchase it for us, as our present term of it has nearly expired.”

The lawyer’s face had grown paler and paler as she proceeded, and he now looked almost ghastly.

As a refuge from her inquiring glance, he buried his face this time completely in his handkerchief, and at last wiped his eyes solemnly, and cleared his throat in a husky manner.

“How soon can it all be done, Mr. Goldsmith?” She was not pleased with his manner, but she imagined he was thinking her proposal over. “I wish to let my husband know the purchase is in progress when I return.”

“Never, madam, if my advice is to be taken—never.” He rose as he spoke, and struck the table with his hand emphatically.

Hester thought him extremely absurd; she had expected some opposition, but this was too much; he had listened to her suggestions when she was younger and less experienced—he should not thwart her now; if he thought to frighten her by a theatrical manner, he was mistaken.

So with far more dignity than he had ever seen in her, she said,—

“I did not take this journey to argue the matter, Mr. Goldsmith, but only to ask you to make the purchase, and I wish you to be as speedy as may suit with your convenience.”

Goldsmith had watched her closely while she spoke, and there seemed to be a slightly vindictive expression in his eyes as her lips curled with her last words.

But only for an instant, even if it had been in his face at all. The next moment he had clasped his hands entreatingly, and was standing before her.

“My dear young lady—I may say, my dear child, for I have

known you from your earliest years—if you are at present, so far as seeming goes, living peacefully and happily with your husband, spare yourself, spare him the misery, spare your infant child, the ruin the purchase of Uplands would entail.”

“I do not understand you, Mr. Goldsmith,” said Hester, now thoroughly angry, “nor what you mean by these allusions. If years ago it was my misfortune to be obliged to speak openly to you of my husband’s errors, your own good feeling should, now that his life is entirely changed, keep you silent on what has gone before.”

Mr. Goldsmith shook his head with the deepest commiseration, and almost wrung his hands still clasped together.

“Do not drive me to extremes,” he said, at last. “For your dead father’s sake, let this matter rest; your property is safe, at present, do not expose it to the risk of being gambled away.—There—there, I have said too much, but you cannot fail of understanding me now.”

Hester had turned deadly white as his meaning reached her. For an instant she felt as if sense and sight were both going, and she grasped eagerly at the table beside which she sat, for support; but when Goldsmith advanced still closer with expressions of regret, the intense dislike she had felt for him ever since he told her the true story of her marriage, brought strength. He should not see that he had the power of giving pain, but in that moment how keenly she wished she had listened to her husband’s request, that she would withdraw her confidence from Goldsmith. She had refused, partly from respect to her father’s memory, and partly because, as she considered Frederic wrong and ill-judged in other things, he must be so in this.

“Do you know what you are saying?” She sat stiffly upright in her chair, and spoke very sternly.

“Too well, too well, my poor child; but you are treating me as if I were an enemy, whereas God knows I am your best and only friend in this. I would save you from ruin; above all, I would save your innocent child from the consequences of that ruin which must be imminent, if you purchase Uplands.”

She looked at him as if she would find out truth, deeply as he might hide it from her; but now he did not flinch or change colour under the searching scrutiny.

“You knew what you were saying, sir; do you know what you are doing?—Stop, I will tell you. You are trying to destroy a man’s fair fame, his truth and his honesty, by which he has

won back a wife's trust and esteem." Even now she would not say love, and Goldsmith noticed it. "But you scarcely know me yet. Dare to utter anything against my husband which you cannot prove, and you shall be punished for calumny by the law of the land. Do not shelter yourself under the hope that I or my husband shall shrink from any exposure, however open; he should not if he would."

One of her old tempests of passion swayed Hester now. She had risen to her feet, and with flashing eyes, quivering nostrils, and flushed cheeks, looked as Goldsmith had rarely seen a woman look before. But she did not frighten him; he seemed rather to think it a piece of consummate acting, far more pleasing than her calm, scornful, suspicious mood.

"What a pity so fine a creature should be so thrown away," he said to himself. To Hester he made no immediate answer; he understood her quite well enough to be sure that, left to herself, she would feel shame for such ungovernable passion. He walked up and down the office, with his eyes bent on the ground, and one hand grasping his chin. And when he turned to where she still stood in profound silence now, he smiled kindly.

"I am used to deal with human emotion, Mrs. Hallam, and I can quite understand yours; it is justifiable and natural, and I should not have thought well of you, had you shown less. Your only error has been—and it is, of course, one on the right side—in allowing a fair seeming to blind you so completely to what has really been going on." She did not attempt to interrupt him now, and stood with her lips firmly pressed together, listening, but with downcast eyes. "Still not one word more shall pass my lips if you are disposed either to doubt me, or to wish matters to remain as they are."

As we have seen, Hester's early education had not been likely to impress her with any of the sacred reverence which should fence in a husband from his wife's suspicions. They had gone to church, and there the religion of their marriage, and her regard for its sacramental virtue, had ended. Her respect for him at first had arisen from his outward superiority, and the halo with which young love always surrounds the object of its worship; but when this golden mist faded, and revealed the flaws in the idol it had enshrouded, she thought herself permitted to judge her husband as she would have done any other offender. He had forfeited every right to her obedience, and although he had under-

stood her quite well enough to refrain from asserting his authority, she would not have obeyed it, if he had. He was a man, and she a woman, and they had each a right to govern themselves ; therefore, none of the scruples which might have troubled a dutiful wife who looked upon her husband as her lord, set by God in authority over her, troubled Hester now ; only she paused a moment, with the caution habitual to her when not over-excited, before she answered,—

“ If you can prove that my husband lives knowingly beyond his income, I will listen to you.”

“ I can prove far more than this,” said Goldsmith ; he seemed excited as he spoke, possibly from the doubt implied in her answer ; “ do you remember the large amount you empowered me to make away with out of your capital, to settle his debts when you came of age ? ”

She bowed her head.

“ Nearly at the same time, as you doubtless remember, Mr. Hallam came into possession of his father’s legacy, which, at your request, I also freed from the claims he had allowed to accumulate upon it ; and a certain income has been also paid ever since to you each, separately, out of the residue of your shattered property—you best know how regular and correct those payments have been—judge, then, of my surprise and grief when your husband applied to me to pay gambling debts almost equalling those cancelled.”

He watched her eagerly as he spoke.

Hester shuddered with doubt and fear, but her suspicious curiosity was now too fully roused to allow her to hesitate. She only sat down again as if to show she was a patient listener.

“ At first I thought of applying to you, that you might use your influence to save him, but then I could not tell how it might be between you ; you might be cognizant of all, and greatly resent my interference—and I lent the money.”

“ Where is its acknowledgment ? ” said Hester, faintly. She felt so deadly sick and cold as the lawyer went on now in a quiet compassionating voice, that she feared each moment to lose consciousness.

“ Patience, my dear child, I am coming to that. I advanced this one sum, and received your husband’s receipt for it. To my great surprise, he called on me a short time ago—do you remember his coming to town, about the Ascot week, I think ? ” She bowed her head. “ He called then and repaid the money.”

"But he was not at Ascot; he went up to see his mother."

"So he told me," said Goldsmith, gravely; "but, my dear young lady, your former experience, when we went through that sad business together, might have convinced you that betting and gambling can go on anywhere. I have told you the plain facts, and leave you to judge; but, perhaps," he added, suddenly, as a new idea seemed to strike him, "you know how he came by the money as well as I do?"

A tap at the door stopped her answer, and gave her time to think. Why should she take his word in this way, plausible as things might seem.

A clerk entered, whom Mr. Goldsmith sent away after a few hurried words.

"I know nothing," she said; "I had every reason to suppose my husband not in debt," and she thought of his present to Biz; but now it seemed to take another shape; perhaps he had sent it as hush money to his conscience, for she had consented to remain with him as his wife solely on the agreement that he would give up all gambling; "but, Mr. Goldsmith, you said you would give me proofs. I do not doubt your word, but I think I ought to have decided proof."

He had watched her eagerly while she spoke, and his face turned a shade yellower as she said the last words.

"You might trust your father's old friend, certainly, without farther question; but, as a man of business, I cannot blame you for not doing so. Worldly wisdom is a sign of early development of the reasoning powers in a woman, and circumstanced as you are, and are likely to continue, you need it more than any one I know. For proofs I can satisfy you doubly. First, do you remember Captain Fortescue? I think you saw him often when you were first married?"

She merely bowed. Any allusion to that sad time made her anxious and doubtful; besides, her interest was too breathless now to interrupt him.

"Unfortunately, he is somewhere in France; but I daresay I could learn where, if you wished it. He will confirm, in every particular, what I have told you; for he knew everything, although he is bound, in honour, not to speak; he told me he dared not visit at Uplands, for he feared your scrutiny."—Her heart sank now, despairingly. How many invitations Fortescue had refused.—"But, my dear Mrs. Hallam, I can offer you other proofs. I do not believe in your husband's Ascot success. I

have discovered since that his repayment to me was simply a blind, because I suppose I remonstrated on his broken faith towards you, and led him to fear I might write to you on the subject; he has put himself into the hands of one of the most notorious money-lenders in London, to whom he already owes large sums."

"Tell me the man's name; I will go there at once."

"Stay a bit. This man is a harpy, and claims usurious and unlawful interest; if you mix yourself up in the matter, and let him see your deep interest, your property is as certainly ruined as if you purchased Uplands, which would soon be in his hands. Your only way to deal with a man of this kind is to show yourself indifferent, and to let him suppose there is nothing to be expected from you; in that case he will squeeze your husband as dry as he can, and then if he finds we are determined he will probably compromise. But the question now is, how you will act with regard to Mr. Hallam."

Hester started shuddering. She sat for a few moments still and silent.

"I must have time to think, Mr. Goldsmith. What did you say was the name of the money-lender?"

He told her, and seeing her still lost in thought, added, as if stung by her want of confidence,—

"If you can remain in town long enough, I could, no doubt, procure you your husband's signatures; but, of course, if suspicion is to be avoided, this cannot be done hastily."

But Hester turned from the proposal.

"I do not know why I should doubt you," she said, sadly; "but still, swear to me solemnly, Mr. Goldsmith, that you have told me the truth, and that your motive in doing so has been for my good, and I will rest satisfied."

Outwardly she was calm, but she knew by that very stillness how much misery his next words might bring.

She looked earnestly at him; he trembled visibly, but it seemed to be with emotion, and stood silent.

Suddenly he caught her hand.

"Bless you, my dear child, for relieving an old man's heart; you do not know, you cannot tell how cruel it is to be doubted when you have done all in your power to serve. If it be any comfort to you in your sorrow, most solemnly do I swear to all I have this day told you, and that it has been to spare you misery—and now," he said, in a less constrained voice, "be guided by me—do not settle these claims at once."

"I have no intention of doing so," she said, dreamily; "I am not likely to see much of Mr. Hallam for the future;" and then she stood still, pressing her hands together as though she would break them; presently she drew a deep breath.

"I wish especially to know where Captain Fortescue is to be found. In the meantime I suppose I need scarcely ask you to maintain the strictest silence about what has come to my knowledge? I should not wish my visit here to transpire for at least a fortnight."

"It shall never be mentioned, my dear lady, unless you desire it; as soon as I learn where Captain Fortescue is, I will forward his address to you."

She rose slowly, pulled down her veil, and prepared to leave the office without speaking.

He held out his hand; she allowed him to take hers for an instant, but it was lifeless in his grasp, and quickly withdrawn, and without another word, except to bid him tell the cab-driver to take her whence she came, they parted.

Goldsmith stood looking after her, at first smiling—but only for an instant: then the perplexed, troubled expression returned.

CHAPTER X.

HESTER'S RESOLVE.

It was pouring with rain that evening when Frederic Hallam returned to Uplands. He went straight to the nursery, where Ralphie gave him a far warmer greeting than usual: he had been so accustomed to his father's constant presence lately that he scarcely knew how to spare him.

"Where's mamma, Ralphie?" He looked round, as if expecting to find Hester watching beside her boy.

"Mamma all gone," said Ralphie, gravely; "Ralphie all alone."

Hallam looked at Parkins for an explanation, she told him her mistress had gone to town on business, and would probably not return till the following day; she said nothing about the old woman—it might be some private business or charity of Mrs. Hallam's. Parkins knew better than any one that this young husband and wife had never been one in confidence or

pursuits, and she thought it safest only to repeat what she had been told to say.

Hallam felt chilled and pained. He had made up his mind during the drive home that his mother would soon leave them: he had heard her say she was going to Switzerland with the Fletchers early in the following week; he and Hester would be alone then, and that should be the beginning of their new life.

He had not felt so happy for a long time. His heart beat like a lover's; and husband though he was, some of a lover's uncertainty had lingered in it as he rode up the avenue, and springing from the saddle, entered through the stable-yard, impatient to seek Hester.

Gone to London! What could she have gone for? It was so extraordinary to leave home in his absence in this sudden way.

He played with Ralphie for a few minutes, and then disregarding, for the first time, his earnest request to "stop a little longer," he wished him good-night, and went to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Hallam lay gracefully on a sofa, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

He went up to her, and asked what was the matter.

She wiped her eyes softly, and, raising herself a little, looked at him and shook her head.

"My dear Fred, I am grieving for you, not myself."

"Why, what's the matter now?" he said, laughing in his old, cheerful way; but he felt sure that something unpleasant was coming.

His mother sat upright now, and looked at him with a sorrowful expression.

"My dear Frederic, will you sit down and listen to me? I have something very special to say."

He sat down unwillingly. Ever since his marriage he detested these requests, which had hitherto resulted in complaints of Hester, and just now it struck him that, in his surprise and anxiety to learn particulars of his wife's journey, he had kept on his wet clothes—for he had ridden home through the rain—and was shivering.

"Well," he said, before his mother could speak, "I am rather in a hurry; but how about Hester's journey—do you know anything about it? Did she leave a message with you?"

"There, that's exactly what I mean; and then you ask, 'what's the matter?' It is enough to try any mother with

heart or feeling, my poor boy, to see you set at nought in this way, and neglected before your own servants."

Frederic Hallam bit his lips, and pulled his whiskers nervously. He did not think Hester had acted rightly, but then he greatly wished his mother would mind her own business.

"Did Hester leave a message?" he said, abruptly.

"Oh, no; and when I remonstrated and said I did not think you would like it, she was so contemptuous and haughty, that really one would imagine she does not feel herself accountable to you or to any one for what she does. It is not right, indeed it is not, Frederic, for a handsome young woman to be going off to London, with only a maid servant, directly her husband's back is turned. If a woman once gets talked about; it's all over with her in country society, as you will find."

"My dear mother, you are mixing things up together," he said, still trying to laugh it off; "just now I thought you were anxious for my sake, and now it seems to be for Hester."

He got up and walked to the window, as if to show he was tired of the subject.

His mother's tears were really flowing now. Some women have an ever-present power of crying—and of crying prettily, too—without the ugly sobs, and swollen eyes, and mouth distortions which make a tearful woman detestable. She followed him to the window, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"My dear boy," she said, soothingly, "you cannot suppose I am blind. I love you far too dearly not to see that you have given your affections to a woman who does not love you in return."

"Mother," he interrupted, hoarsely, "I cannot suffer this."

But she would go on. In such a matter she was sure to triumph.

"I will not dwell on this part of the subject, Frederic; if she is so wilfully blind to her own happiness, it is not in my power to open her eyes; but you have no right to suffer her to take your place, and to rule you completely."

He did not answer her at once, he was so thoroughly vexed; and, although his mother's unkind neglect of Hester when they were in London had greatly weakened his love for her, still she was his mother, and had a right to his forbearance.

"The old saying, 'it is ill meddling betwixt husband and wife,' holds good still, I suppose," he said, "my dear mother." She had turned away as he spoke. "I love you too well to discuss this subject: we must agree to differ about it privately."

"Then you really mean to let things remain as they are?"

"I really had rather not talk on the subject at all," he said, wearily, but still maintaining his self-command.

"Very well; then don't blame me or think me unkind if I say I would rather leave before Hester's return. I know that my staying or going is perfectly indifferent to her; in fact, she thinks only of herself and——"

"Mother," said Hallam, with more indignation in his tone than his mother had heard for years; "you say that, when you saw her in Ralphie's illness——"

"Ah me! I see I might as well talk to the wind."

She was thoroughly put out; good-tempered as she usually was, she liked her dignity to be respected, and much as she worshipped her wealth, she disliked her daughter-in-law's superiority; perhaps there is no offence so great in a silly woman's eyes as that of unmistakably superior talent in one whom, in some other ways, she considers scarcely her equal. Mrs. Hallam did not know before how great her dislike was. As she felt at present, she would gladly have separated Fred from his wife for ever; and her sense of her own importance led her to think that he might in time be influenced by her marked disapprobation of the way in which things now existed.

Her son only said,—

"I should be very glad if the subject were ended," and then, scarcely pausing for a reply, he went to his dressing-room.

But he did not change his damp clothes at once. His mother had told him unpleasant truths, but they had been truths for all that.

Still, if his hopes were realized, all would be right; but he would not explain to his mother the reason of Hester's changed manner; or of the consciousness of wrong-doing which caused him to bear it, however unwillingly. He had never confided the secret of his marriage to any one but Goldsmith and Fortescue, and it need never be known now. He smiled sadly to himself at his mother's urgency about Hester's want of love; in former times, when she had planned many and many a match for him, love or mutual happiness had never been mentioned in her calculations.

He was sorry she should leave Uplands with angry feelings; but it was better she should go. Frederic Hallam had none of the misjudged notions of dove-tailing one person's disposition into another's, that make so much mischief in families; if people

could not agree, he thought they were better apart, and he had quite given up the idea that Hester and his mother could ever sympathize.

And in some ways it would be a relief to him now to be spared a witness of his meeting with his wife, for he was really angry with her. Hitherto, her contemptuous words had been uttered when they were alone; she had never publicly set him at naught; their habit of outward self-control, which had probably hindered their reconciliation, helped the fair seeming of their life; but this was a decided step taken without his sanction or approval.

He thought deliberately over the events of yesterday. He remembered for the first time that as he went towards her room to bid Hester good-by—for his intention was to sleep at Mr. Crathie's—(his wife would have deemed leave-taking very absurd and superfluous, if he had been only going away for a short time)—he met Parkins, who told him her mistress had asked not to be disturbed, even by him, for at least three hours.

It had been so usual for Hester to shut herself up when engaged in deep study, and to be exceedingly annoyed when disturbed, that although he felt disappointed, he had not been surprised; but now it appeared to him that he had been wrong, and that he ought to have entered the study. What right had a wife to shut herself up from her husband? His mother said truly, he had been too weak and yielding in all these things; but, then, if Love returned, would they not right themselves? Surely, then, Hester would seek him instead of shunning him.

He walked across the gallery to the nursery, and called to Parkins.

"When did you say your mistress would return?" he said, carelessly.

"To-night, sir, or to-morrow morning."

"She took some one with her besides Françoise?"

He asked it as a question, but Parkins understood him to be asserting his knowledge of Biz's presence.

"Yes, sir, old Mrs. Black."

Hallam turned round and looked hard at her.

"Whom did you say?" he said, closing the nursery door, as if unwilling that any one but himself should hear her answer.

"Old Mrs. Black, sir." Parkins felt rather alarmed by his earnest manner. "An old person who came to see mistress yesterday morning, and slept here, and went away with her to-day."

He only remembered the old servant under the name of Biz ; he had quite forgotten her surname.

"What sort of a looking person, Parkins ? You did not mention her before."

"Didn't I, sir ? Well, perhaps not. I don't know that any one but me hardly knew about her being here. I'm sure Mrs. Hallam didn't, for she had a bad headache, and didn't get up to breakfast, and I waited on her myself, for her maid has been away for a two days' holiday, and has only just come home."

Hallam had time to recover himself during this speech, but Parkins, who seemed anxious to change the subject, suddenly exclaimed,—

"Why, sir, you've never changed your things after all, and you're as white as death : shall I come and set light to the fire in your dressing-room ?"

"No ; oh, no." He wished to be alone, and, spite of Parkins' repeated injunctions, for, like all the other servants, she dearly loved her master, he was some time yet before he took off his wet clothes.

Who could this old woman be, to take Hester from her home in this sudden way ? He did not choose to ask any more questions ; he wished he had not seen Parkins at all.

However, it was his mother's last evening : he must not let her spend it alone.

Mrs. Hallam remarked how he shivered, and complained of cold during the evening ; and when he bade her good-night, she told him his lips were burning—he said his head ached—and thinking that he probably took Hester's conduct more to heart than he chose to admit, she took no further notice.

He accompanied Mrs. Hallam to the railway station early next morning, and then drove to see a farmer at some distance, whose stock Mr. Crathie had mentioned in terms of high praise the day before. The weather was cold and showery for the time of year ; but he was restless, and felt that he must fill up the time with active occupation till his wife's return. It was luncheon time when he again reached Uplands.

Hester returned home that morning. To Françoise's infinite disgust, she travelled by the very earliest train, and so only just missed her husband.

It was an inexpressible relief to find him absent and Mrs. Hallam gone ; during her homeward journey, and in the previous

time after she left Mr. Goldsmith's office, she had tried to decide on some line of conduct, but nothing would take defined shape ; all plans crumbled away directly she tried to reflect upon any one of them.

The only idea that stood out from the shrouding blackness of her despair was that she must be freed from her husband's presence---she did not think of divorce or of any settled separation ; all she wanted was to be free from daily companionship, nay, from the sight of one whom she despised, and yet whom she equally despised herself for not hating.

She went mechanically to the nursery and kissed Ralphie ; the child, spite of all her recent care, did not cling to her as he had done to his father ; but Hester was too self-absorbed to notice this.

After awhile she went down stairs into her study. How hateful that room was to her now ; it seemed as if months had passed by since she had sat there, dreaming of a happy future with the man who now, to her proud sense of honour, had sinned beyond any possibility of forgiveness. It would have been impossible to Hester to break her plighted word ; therefore she had no mercy, no thought that a repenting sinner ought to be more dearly cherished than a just high-minded one who has never been in like manner tempted.

Her eyes fell on a letter, evidently placed to attract her attention. Mrs. Hallam had put it there on the previous day ; it had come enclosed to her in a letter from Martha Hallam, who had received it from Mrs. Bonham.

Hester knew the handwriting ; it was from her aunt Wrenshaw, and its affectionate tone soothed her while she read.

Mrs. Wrenshaw apologised for her long silence ; she said that, not hearing from Hester, she had not liked to trouble her with letters, as the last two or three she had sent had remained unanswered. Hester had never sent to her since her estrangement from her husband ; she said she wrote now, because Lucy had heard from Miss Hallam that Hester had passed very near Arden, last autumn, when she was in France ; perhaps if she had known that her uncle and aunt had been living there for nearly three years, she would have paid them a visit : Mr. Wrenshaw hoped much that Hester and her husband would go and see them the next time they went to France ; they had a nice house, and would do all in their power to make them comfortable.

There was a yearning motherly strain in the expression of all

this that made her long to be a child again, and to lay her head in aunt Wrenshaw's lap and tell her all her sorrow, as she had once done, when as a little girl she was sent to school against her will; the only time in her reserved life that she had really opened her heart to any one; probably, although she did not know it, this was the link that bound her to her aunt Wrenshaw.

As she sat thus thinking—she had done little else for the last day and night—the link grew stronger and stronger, and seemed to be drawing her with mighty, irresistible force to one who she felt loved her.

“The only creature who ever did love me,” she said mentally, and her lips quivered, while her heart felt heavy and swollen with the tears that would not come.

But a defined purpose was shaping itself, and she felt for the time relieved from the crushing pressure of her misery.

Long before her husband returned, her resolution was taken.

CHAPTER XI.

HESTER LEAVES UPLANDS.

“Who was this old woman who came here and went away with you, and why did you go?”

Frederic Hallam said this as soon as luncheon was over, and the servants had withdrawn.

His wife's constrained, severe greeting had irritated him almost beyond endurance, when he thought her so much to blame.

“The old woman was my old servant, Elizabeth Black; she came here to thank you for your kindness to her; but I would rather not say why I went away. Her visit was quite unconnected with my absence from home.”

“I really think, Hester,” he said, his colour rising at her contemptuous tone, “that you should be more open with me. I don't acknowledge your right to do these eccentric things.”

“Very likely; but circumstanced as I am, I cannot move exactly in the beaten route that other women tread. But now I want to speak to you,” she said, as if quite enough had passed on the subject. “I have a letter from my aunt Mrs. Wrenshaw, asking me to visit her at Arden where she is staying; my health and spirits have been severely tried lately, and in every way I feel

that I must have a decided change of scene. Have you any objection against my accepting this invitation?"

There was a pause before he answered.

"Do you intend to travel alone?" For there was a defiance in the tone of her request, that had awakened him to the fact that some strange change had again taken place in his wife.

"With Françoise," and she moved as if about to leave the room.

"I repeat, Hester, that I greatly prefer you should not do these eccentric things. You set people wondering and talking more than you aware of. It is neither right nor pleasant."

"Very possibly," she answered, without looking at him, and his anger rose almost beyond control.

"I wish, Hester, you would be less sententious. If you would even fly in a passion, like any other woman, it would be better; then we could come to some sort of explanation; but you are so cold-blooded, you are enough to provoke the quietest fellow going."

She smiled scornfully.

"I might remind you, that in former times you said it was unladylike to lose one's temper; but that would be idle now."

Hallam started up with a violent effort at self-control. He restrained himself, although an irritation he could scarcely master, and which he had never before felt, was gaining hold of him.

"You are ladylike enough for any one, as far as the world goes," he said, abruptly; "but I wish you were more like a woman. What I mean is this: I wish—I ought to say I insist—that you should put off this journey for a month; by that time Ralphie would be strong enough to travel, we could all go together, and all scandal would be avoided."

"You have heard me say that I am above scandal." Her voice still sounded hard and unmoved; his evident wish to accompany her had not touched her, it had only increased her anxiety to be free.

"But you are not the only person to be considered. Come, Hester, be reasonable." He walked up to her, and laid his hand on her arm. In that moment the remembrance of his vow made him determine that there should be at least an explanation between them; but his head throbbed and felt confused, he was no match for Hester just then. "I beg of you to put off this journey for a month. I—I don't want to be left alone." He said this without looking at her, as if the words had escaped,

She laughed bitterly, and withdrew from his touch.

"Say that it suits you we should travel together. Do not invent any sentiment, it is a mockery now. I tell you, I am not well, and for many reasons I wish to be alone with aunt Wrenshaw. If you prevent me from leaving you at once, I feel that I shall be seriously ill. You know me too well to think me fanciful about my health. There are many things," she added, in a gentler tone, "which had better be explained between us; but—but——" Her voice trembled slightly. "I think if we were apart for a while, and wrote fully to each other, it might be good for both."

Her lip quivered as she spoke.

"I think," he said, "that you are mistaken, and that a wife's place is beside her husband. Still, if you really feel that your health requires an immediate change, I will not oppose your wishes: only you must not travel alone with Françoise, but that can be arranged. I wish we might both leave Ralphie. I have been feeling lately, Hester," and spite of her determined coldness, he took her hand in his and pressed it fondly, "that a happier life is dawning for us, and I had hoped," he added proudly, as she withdrew her hand, "that you shared this wish."

"Pray say no more," she said, in an abrupt harsh voice; "write what you will when I am gone; if you urge me now you will make me say what can never be recalled. It is understood, then, that you consent to my leaving Uplands the day after to-morrow."

She left the room without waiting for an answer. If Hallam had followed her then, he might have wondered still more at her conduct; but he would not have accused her of want of feeling, as he now did.

Locking herself in her bed-chamber, she threw herself on her knees, and hiding her face on the coverlet, burst into passionate weeping.

What was it? Was she bewitched, or what evil influence was over her, that she should so long to believe her husband innocent? She could not be so base so worthless as to love him spite of all. If Goldsmith had not made his revelation, how happy they might have been, for her husband's manner confirmed her belief that he was ready to ask *her* forgiveness, and tell her he had learned to love her. Still she never thought that *he* had anything to forgive, or that it was wonderful that his love had so patiently endured her coldness: self-blame and self-distrust were feelings still unknown to Hester Hallam. Her own want of self-command surprised her; she had resolved that morning, that although

for the present she must be freed from her husband's presence, yet that she would not decide her ultimate fate until she had seen Captain Fortescue; then, if his account confirmed Goldsmith's, she scarcely knew how she should act. To leave Ralphie in his father's hands entirely, to be brought up by a man devoid of truth and honour, would be impossible; yet, unless she returned to her husband, she saw no means of retaining any influence over the child; and she shrank from this alternative with tears that flowed from the acknowledgment of her own weakness, more than for sorrow for him and his crime. Could she be, then, so infatuated as to shrink from the influence of this man, who had forfeited for the second time all claim to her good opinion? No, it was impossible; she rose from her knees, and seated herself in a low chair beside the bed. Her tears, rare visitants, violent and stormy as they had been, had calmed her. She persuaded herself that she was not well; that the shock of Goldsmith's revelation had unnerved her will, and clouded her judgment; that away from Uplands she should see things more as they really were—now she must be vigilant against any explanation or reconciliation with her husband before she had seen Fortescue.

The next day passed listlessly for both, each feeling that their estrangement had widened, Hester alone knowing why. Hallam was greatly depressed; he feared that his petulant manner had increased her dislike; for there had been something in the way she had shrunk from his touch which deeply wounded him. As we know, it had proceeded from a fear, an inward shrinking from what she had at this moment felt to be an irresistible influence; but she could not have sought out, if she had tried to do so, a more effectual barrier against her husband's affection.

Once again, when next morning she bade farewell to little Ralphie, her courage nearly failed her.

"Mamma not go away again," he said, in his sweet plaintive voice; "mamma come back soon to Ralphie."

But she heard her husband's step in the gallery, and resolutely forced back her tears: she so dreaded lest he should take advantage of any appearance of weakness.

When they reached the hall—he had followed her silently down stairs—he said,—

"Hester, come in here a moment," and led the way into the library.

She could not refuse him then, for all the servants were grouped round, ready to see her depart.

"I am going with you to the station, Hester," he said, very gravely; "but it will be too late then. If you knew how ill I feel, I think you would put off this journey even now."

He looked earnestly at her.

She was cold and impassive. She could not bear men to complain of illness, and she thought this night, after all, be but a subterfuge to prevent her going.

He went on rapidly, his cheeks flushing while he spoke.

"I am not able to say all I wish. I should, probably, only arouse your scorn and anger, and I wish to part kindly with you; but—Hester, if you would have stayed with me now, we might have gone on more happily afterwards."

He did not take her hand, or throw his arm round her; but there was a manly earnestness of love in his face and voice, before which her pride melted. He had not asked her pardon, but yet for the moment Love triumphed.

She threw both arms round his neck, and kissed him as she had not done for years.

"There may be happier times yet," she whispered. "I go in the hope of them—I cannot say more; there, you must not come with me now;" and, closing the door behind her, she stepped into the carriage, where all was ready, and told Martin to drive off.

Many times during the journey to the coast, she felt that she must return—must begin that new life that she yet believed possible; but as distance widened between her and Uplands, doubt revived. One by one, Goldsmith's accusations returned, and the earnestness with which they had been uttered. She wondered that she had gone back at all to Uplands: it would have spared both Fred and herself much misery if she had written to him from London, and gone straight to France to seek for Captain Fortescue.

Then it occurred to her that her husband could probably have given her a clue by which to find him; but she had heard that Lady Helena and her husband had gone to live at Nardes some months previously—a fashionable French bathing-place not very far from Arden, although on a totally different line of route.

They reached Arden without much delay or difficulty; but when Hester inquired at the hotel where they stopped for Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw, she found that they had gone to Nardes for a fortnight, and had only started the previous day. They seemed to be well known at the hotel, and the garçon said that, although

there was no railway or diligence traffic between Arden and Nardes, there was the malle-poste. "Monsieur and Madame Rainshaw had so travelled; there would be room for madame and her maid, if the other servant and some of the baggage could be disposed of. The malle-poste would be starting in an hour, but that would be too soon for madame; she would rest a day or two, so as not to be too much exhausted."

But Hester was in no mood for delay or rest. She was soon settling with Martin to travel back by diligence—there being a difficulty in finding other conveyance to the coast-town whence they had come—and to proceed by railway or in the best way he could thence to Nardes.

The man hesitated.

"Will you travel alone, ma'am? My master particularly said I was not to leave you without protection."

Was it affection, she wondered, or a dread that she might be trying to escape from him, that had made Frederic so anxious.

"You see it cannot be helped, Martin; there is only room for two, and I could not trust Françoise as I can you. I shall find my uncle at Nardes, and shall be quite safe with him till you arrive."

She had told her husband not to expect to hear from her for at least a week, and it did not occur to her that it was necessary to tell him at once of her change of route.

CHAPTER XII.

WAITING AT THE GATE.

FREDERIC HALLAM had told the truth when he said that he was ill, and before the day closed in—the long weary day that succeeded his wife's departure—he began to feel that the shooting pains in his limbs and a burning throbbing in his temples, and an indisposition to exertion, were symptoms of a more serious nature than he ever remembered before. For, although like many men of his bright complexion, delicate and unable to endure hardship, he had never had a serious illness.

He would not send for the village doctor; oh, no! he was convinced that Ralphie would not have been so ill if he had been properly managed at first; if he did not feel better next day he should telegraph for Dr.—.

In one way his illness spared him ; his head was so confused that he had no power of concentrated thought, and when at night he fell into broken fragments of slumber, he seemed to be always pursuing some idea that he could not clearly grasp, and yet which he felt himself bound to master. Whether it had been growing through the night, or whether it was a fresh vagary of his wearied brain, when he awoke in the morning, or rather aroused from the dreamy stupor in which the long night had been passed, it was with a fixed determination to revisit Kirton's Farm.

He rang for his railway guide before he had finished dressing, and found that, by starting very early, he could reach Driven in time to ride over to Kirton's Farm, and return to Uplands late in the evening.

Probably through the haze of his fast clouding senses, there glimmered the suspicion that he was about to do something strange and unusual ; for when Parkins brought Ralphie down to him at breakfast, he merely told her not to keep the child up to see him, as he should not be home till night.

Parkins was a cautious, quiet woman, too much bound now to her employers to discuss their affairs with her fellow servants ; but she had not been blind or unobservant during the last few days, and had come to the conclusion that her master and mistress had quarrelled, and that Mrs. Hallam was not likely to return home in a hurry. Her master was her favourite, and was therefore, of course, the least to blame, and when she saw how pale and haggard he looked this morning, she felt very angry with her mistress.

"You don't look at all well, sir," she said, with a familiarity nurses seem to consider their right when health is in question, and letting Ralphie stand on the table beside his papa ; "it's my opinion, sir, you took a heavy cold that day you forgot to change your things. It never does to sit in wet things. You ought to nurse yourself a bit, sir."

"No, I don't feel well. A ride across country will do me good. You can leave Master Ralph, and tell them to bring my horse round ; I don't want Simon."

Parkins went away, shaking her head. She did not at all approve of the way things were going on at Uplands ; first her mistress starting off all of a sudden to London, next to France ; and then her master, evidently with an illness over him, setting off to ride about alone, no one knew where, for a whole day, and without so much as saying where he was going.

She delivered her message, and then went back for the child.

"You will come back to-night, sir," she said, looking hard at him.

"I told you I should do so."

And he spoke in such an abrupt decided way, that, just lifting Ralphie for a good-by kiss, she went away without reply.

He was certainly about to do something very unusual, and had Parkins known what he meditated, she would have given her opinion more decidedly, at the risk of making him very angry.

I have before said that Frederic Hallam was accomplished in all manly sports and exercises; and yet, hitherto, he had never been reckless or careless of his health. Now he proposed, ill as he felt, to take a long fatiguing railway journey; to allow himself a bare hour's interval, which he meant to employ in visiting Kirton's Farm, and then to take the same long journey home. He thought he would take his horse with him; he should find him useful in riding round the farm.

Some confused notion of old Biz and her journey to Uplands must have flitted through his thoughts, for when he reached the station he had persuaded himself that he should find the old servant at Kirton's Farm.

Many times during that day did little Ralphie and his dog, who was with him more than ever since his recovery, go out along the avenue in hopes of meeting his father; and then, tired of waiting, sit down under the lofty chestnut trees to rest, patting his companion's head, and saying sadly in his sweet little voice,—

"No use, Beewee, pap-pa all gone."

Parkins, sitting at needlework under the shady trees, let him spend the whole afternoon thus; but the little fellow's sadness made her at last feel that a change of ideas would be desirable, and taking his hand, she prepared to return to the house.

"Come along now, dear, we'll play on the grass a top with Beewee."

But Ralphie would not leave the avenue, he shook his head.

"Ralphie stop, see when pap-pa comes," was all the answer he vouchsafed her, and calling to Beewee to follow him, he ran towards the entrance gates.

There the little creature stood resolutely till past his usual bedtime, shading his eyes with one tiny hand, and looking down the

road before him ; with the other he every now and then patted the great dog as he stood beside him, as if to encourage his patience ; and although he took no notice of Parkins, he said softly and lovingly to his dumb friend,—

“Not long now, Beewee. Pap-pa come soon.”

But morning came, and still his father had not come back to Ralphie.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT NARDES.

THE malle-poste clattered over the round stones of Nardes, jumping Françoise nearly into her mistress's lap, and stopped at last in the court-yard of a large comfortable-looking hotel.

There were plenty of loungers about, who all turned to look at the beautiful, well-dressed Englishwoman when she stepped from the vehicle.

A buzz of curiosity followed her as she disappeared under the portico, for among the ways of killing time at Nardes, none is more in favour than that of discussing everybody's looks and dress, and understanding everybody's business better than he does himself.

“*Anglaise, pur sang,*” said one gentleman, whose small stature, fiercely twirled moustache, and stiff gait, seemed to announce his military profession, but who really was a clerk in the Douane of Nardes, and who, thus raised a step, and but a step above the shop-keepers, delighted in asserting his importance and individuality in the most approved fashion of the day. It is plain that those old-fashioned doctrines about humility, and taking the lowest place, and talking as little as possible about oneself and one's belongings, were not intended for this superior and enlightened age. “*Nous avons changé tout cela,*” both in England and France. Our douanier, Monsieur Simon, was a lady-killer, and he already began to calculate at which of the *soirées* to which he was admitted, he might possibly have the opportunity of fascinating the lovely Englishwoman.

“*Pas si mal,*” said another, the son of the chief banker of the town, who was coming from the hotel as Hester entered with another gentleman. “But why is it,” he continued, “that these Englishwomen never smile? They think enough of them-

selves, one may see that by their manner, and the way they claim, as an established right, *place aux dames* ; but for all that they do not make the most of themselves."

Monsieur Adolphe Bouchet had spent three weeks in London, and therefore was a great authority in such matters, although, perhaps, with the quick insight into character which both Frenchmen and Frenchwomen possess, three weeks will teach them more than three months in France would to one of our ordinary, dignified, self-conscious countrymen. A Frenchman does not suppose that every one is looking at him, criticising his dress, his looks, and above all, his accent. He is perfectly aware of his own importance ; but then it is, and has always been, such a recognised fact that it does not trouble him ; he is more bent on making himself agreeable from a species of courteous vanity in which we are deficient ; and then he seeks, as the chief object of his existence, to amuse himself ; and any one who does this sincerely, with no *arrière pensée*, is pretty certain to be amusing to others. And being free from himself, he has all his faculties under command to observe others.

Monsieur Bouchet's companion, a country cousin from the interior, who had seen few English, had been struck dumb with the sight of Hester's beauty.

"Perhaps," he said simply, in answer to his cousin's assertion, "the lady would be too beautiful if she smiled ; she would then be an angel."

"Bah ! Théophile. I am thinking now it is possible these Anglaises have ugly teeth, and that is why they cannot smile ; we will see at the theatre, for Levassor is here, you know, and she must laugh at Levassor."

"And if she has ugly teeth, my friend," said his literal cousin, "she will laugh behind her fan."

Hester, meanwhile, found herself again disappointed. An English lady and gentleman answering her description, had applied for rooms on the previous day ; but Monsieur Montoreau, the host, with shoulders raised to his ears and uplifted hands, had been obliged, to his deep sorrow, to confess that there was no place to be had, and had sent them to the Hôtel de l'Europe, a little further down on the other side of the street. He wished madame to receive the assurance of his infinite regrets, and accompanied her to the entrance gate to point out the Hôtel de l'Europe. Her appearance caused a second lull in the talk among the group of idlers, not from any fear that she might overhear the

admiration she had excited—a Frenchman seems to consider that an “*Anglaise*” can swallow any amount of flattery—but in order that they might, by a closer scrutiny, satisfy themselves that they had not overrated her attractions.

Their fixed gaze annoyed her, and she raised her head proudly, and walked on with a quicker step.

This excited Monsieur Simon’s admiration beyond control : he launched into an ecstasy of praise, and compared Hester to about half-a-dozen goddesses at once.

“She is then more beautiful than your English *Miladi*,” said a friend.

“*Je crois bien*,” repeated Monsieur Simon, several times, with scornful emphasis. “It is,” he continued, striking his breast vehemently, “as Aurora beside the dark-browed night—as Venus beside Thalestris—ah, she is divine, adorable.” Then smiling, and checking himself as he saw smiles on the faces of some of his hearers, although they were too polite to laugh—“Messieurs,” he said, bowing with his hand on his heart, “I am poet, and the sight of such an irresistible beauty awakens the divine flame in my soul ; but it can only be expressed in verses.”

And after he left them still the other idlers did not laugh ; they were mostly younger than Monsieur Simon, and admired him as a genius, who some day would prove a beacon to his native town, as it was known that all the stray pieces of rhyme which appeared in the *Messager de Nardes*, were the offspring of his inspiration, although there were some of the more educated townspeople, among others Monsieur Bouchet, who had not lingered among the idlers, but had walked on in advance of Hester and her maid ; for M. Adolphe had seen her look of annoyance,—who attributed these poems to a very diligent perusal of André Chénier, rather than to any inward promptings.

M. Simon, the little douanier, watched Hester enter the Hôtel de l’Europe, and after satisfying himself that she had taken up her abode there, departed to his bureau, resolved, if possible, to gain an introduction to her in the evening promenade on the *Jetée*.

“For,” as he said to himself, “she is probably one of these English *veuves voyageuses*, and no doubt knows everybody here.”

Hester had been shown into one of those comfortless, but gaudy-looking rooms, where looking-glasses in elaborately gilt frames, with girandoles to match, and a couple of pendules on marble tables, seem to express, that looking at themselves, and keeping appointments, are the chief wants of travellers.

Mrs. Wrenshaw came in soon, but she did not know her niece, and made her a formal courtesy. Hester had merely given her name to the waiter, and it had, of course, reached her aunt's ears under a new form.

It was very painful just then not to be welcomed immediately—in her over-wrought state, Hester felt as though she must leave Nardes at once; but in a moment her aunt had recognized her, and then the warmth of her greeting atoned for her first stiffness.

"I do not think your uncle will know you, either. You are grown such a woman, Hester."

Mr. Wrenshaw was away, she said. There was a review at St. Arlaix, about twenty miles off, and he had gone to see it, and would not return for a day or two. It was doubly delightful to see her dear niece, when she had been counting on two long dreary days without Mr. Wrenshaw.

"We shall be two doleful widows together, Hester, dear, and must try to keep up each other's spirits."

Not a word of reproach to her niece for her long silence. She only seemed overjoyed at Hester's affection in accepting her invitation so frankly, and, though she asked kindly after her husband, she made no comment on his absence.

Hester felt like a hypocrite. In her rare intercourse with aunt Wrenshaw, she had always been drawn to frankness with her; and when as they were sitting together in the evening, Mrs. Wrenshaw said,—“I am so glad, my dear child, for your sake, that we secured a sitting-room at once, for the place is filling fast. At first we thought only of having a comfortable bedroom, and using the *table-d'hôte*; but that would not have been nice for you—you are not used to makeshifts”—Hester said abruptly,—

"Aunt, I must tell you the truth. I did not come here on purpose to see you. I had another reason."

"What was that?" said her aunt, without raising her eyes from her knitting.

But finding that no answer came, she looked up.

Hester's head was bent, and her face hidden between her hands.

In a moment the ball of cotton had fallen to the ground and the pins lay idly in her lap, as her aunt laid one hand gently on Hester's shoulder.

"What is it, my dear child?" she said, in that soft, earnest

tone, which only those who have been mothers can use, and which seems as powerful in winning confidence, as it is gentle in its manner of doing so.

The voice, the gentle touch, the loving fearlessness—for, after all, had not it been the secret curse of Hester's life, that all who knew her well, feared her—pierced straight through the barriers her pride, and coldness, and intense reserve had reared on all sides of her heart, till it seemed well nigh for ever fenced away from human sympathy.

Closer the hands were pressed over the eyes, and tighter the slender fingers clasped the burning forehead, yet through these last outward helps, by which the proud woman sought to shield her sorrow from the gaze of others, nature forced its way in hot tears and bursting sobs, that seemed too strong for such a young tender frame to bear.

Mrs. Wrenshaw was distressed and surprised. She had been used to deal with gentle, loving natures, and this passionate vehemence frightened her.

She took the wisest course she could; she did not attempt to check or restrain what seemed to be the outpouring of an overburdened heart, but sat patiently beside her, waiting till the very violence of the emotion should bring calm.

But when Hester, having checked her sobs, rose to go away, her aunt stopped her.

"Stay here, dearest," she said, "no one will disturb you, and you need not fear that I shall press you with questions, Hester, if I find that you are unwilling to tell what causes this unhappiness."

Hester sat down again, but she did not speak for some time. Her tears ceased, but she kept her eyes fixed on the ground with a look of hopeless misery.

"I will tell you all some day, aunt Hester," she said at last; "now it seems hardly right to do so, until I have decided how to act."

"I must ask you to tell me one thing," said her aunt, gravely, for something had jarred her in the tone of the last words. "You have not come here in opposition to your husband's wishes, or because there is any estrangement between you? Forgive me, my dear child, for asking this," for Hester had coloured deeply, "but it seemed strange to me to hear you speak of deciding on your own actions."

"I came here with my husband's consent," said Hester; "but

I scarcely understand why you should be surprised at my deciding for myself; surely every woman is the best judge of what her own conduct should be."

Mrs. Wrenshaw looked at her in astonishment. Could this be the shrinking, timid girl whose silence she had always attributed to a consciousness of her own deficiencies? She had been much struck by the change in her niece's manner and appearance, but she had attributed the almost haughty self-possession with which she gave her orders, to the position she now occupied as mistress of Uplands; she had not suspected the inward self-will and self-reliance from which it sprung, nor the over-weening pride in her own intellect which made Hester unwilling to submit to any control save her own.

"No, I do not think so; certainly, no married woman can judge so well for herself as her husband can."

Hester's lips curled, and yet for the first time a faint doubt of herself arose. Could this be the aunt Wrenshaw whose talents and education had always seemed dream-like to her childhood? To be as clever, as well-read, as aunt Hester, had then seemed more than she dared to hope; and now, in her highly gifted superiority, she despised her for submitting her will to that of any one, or rather she tried to despise her. As she looked in her aunt's face, she felt that, though sorrow and suffering had left few traces of mere facial beauty, there was a cheerful peace, a look of deep happiness, she had never seen in her own.

There is a singular fascination about some women—and it does not belong to any particular type among them; it may be found among the shy and reserved, and also among franker, warmer natures, but I think it seldom exists except in a very loving temperament—I mean the power of winning the confidence of others, without any effort of their own, sometimes almost contrary to their wishes. Troubles, sorrows, heart-breaks, joys, are poured out to them, as if the speaker were irresistibly impelled like Columbus, in search of a new world, to seek the unseen unspoken sympathy, he feels sure of finding.

It is dangerous to pass an evening alone with one of these persons; they are not inquisitive, because, as I have said, they rather shrink from, than seek, the responsibility which confidences entail; but, however reserved you may be, if you have any secret sorrow or trouble pressing you down, it will be strange if you do not strive, much as it may be against your previous resolutions, to share the burden of it with your friend.

Hester fell under this spell, although she rebelled against it. She did not answer at once, but sat thinking, while Mrs. Wrenshaw resumed her knitting.

"I have dropped so many stitches," she said, "that I must go to the other window to get better light: I am knitting your uncle's winter socks; he likes my knitting so much better than those he buys."

Hester sighed; how many times her aunt had referred to him, while she, except in reply to Mrs. Wrenshaw's questions, had not mentioned her husband's name.

She began to see that they argued from different points, and consequently could not understand each other's feelings.

"But, aunt," she said, after a long silence, "what you said just now would of course be true, where a husband's judgment is equal or superior to a wife's, and also when he is able to appreciate the principles on which she acts."

It had grown very dark where Hester was sitting; she could not see her aunt's pained, surprised look.

"I don't understand you," she said, quickly; "husbands and wives ought to understand each other, it is their duty; but, even supposing this is unhappily not so, it is always a wife's place to submit to her husband."

"Supposing she does not consider him honourable, is she to trust him?" said Hester, bitterly.

And then she wished the words unsaid.

Mrs. Wrenshaw did not answer; she longed most earnestly that her husband were at home to counsel her in this matter; she was so accustomed to look to him for guidance, that she felt only half herself without him.

She was sure that there was something very wrong between Frederic Hallam and his wife, and yet she was so afraid of thinking matters worse than they really were, that she dared not hazard any conjectures; she had always imagined that Hester loved Mr. Hallam very dearly; had she not given up all her own family for him? Mr. Wrenshaw had said the young man had had a view to her money in marrying, and, considering how greatly she was in every way his inferior, it seemed probable; but still her aunt had fondly cherished the notion that any man must eventually learn to appreciate Hester for her own sake; and when she saw her refined, beautiful, all that she considered the wife of such a man as Frederic Hallam ought to be, she had not at first doubted that they were perfectly happy in each other's affection.

Her niece's unwillingness to speak of her husband had roused an uneasiness which her subsequent words had deepened into fear.

The street was very dark now, and the passengers and traffic had gradually diminished to an almost unbroken stillness.

"I will ring for lights," she said rising, when they had sat some time longer in silence.

"No, don't have lights, aunt"—Hester spoke in the old hard, abrupt way.

Her aunt started; she could scarcely see her in the darkness, and she could have fancied her again the uncultivated girl at Kirton's Farm.

"Then I will close this window," she said, "for it grows chilly to a rheumatic old woman like me. How heavy they are," she said as she pushed the cumbrous lattices together, "and what bolts! except that they shut from inside, and have panes instead of lozenges, do you know, Hester, they remind me of the windows at Kirton's Farm."

How glad Hester was that the room was in darkness then.

"Have you seen the Farm lately? Oh, no; I forgot how long you have been in France. Aunt Hester," she said, suddenly; "I want you to tell me if you have met with a Captain Fortescue here or at Arden?"

The question surprised Mrs. Wrenshaw, it seemed so irrelevant.

"Not at Arden, and you forget I have only been here two days," she said. "I scarcely know any one yet; but stay, there are some people of the name of Fortescue here; I have heard their names mentioned; in fact, I believe I am to meet them at a *soirée* to-morrow at Madame de Saint Charles'. You will have to go with me, Hester; you will create quite a sensation."

Hester smiled bitterly.

"I did not count on going into society, aunt; but if there is a chance of seeing Captain Fortescue, I will gladly go. I thought you said you did not know any one."

"No, I don't; but when we arrived here we met a friend of a very old friend of ours, Mrs. Snody, and she insists on my going to this party; but I think it was a Lady Mary, or a Lady Something Fortescue, that she said I was to meet."

Hester sickened with disgust and disappointment. Could she face that cruel woman who had poisoned all her happiness? and yet where Lady Helena was her brother-in-law might possibly be,

or, at any rate, she might learn where he was, if she could make up her mind to speak to her.

"It is, no doubt, Lady Helena Fortescue—a hateful woman whom I detest."

"Oh, my dear child, you are not in earnest," for her manner was frightfully vehement.

"Yes, I am, aunt Hester. She did me, three years ago, the greatest wrong one woman can do to another. You do not expect me to forget it."

"But you surely have not cherished revenge all this time. Hester, my dear child, you are greatly changed."

"Yes, I am changed; and it is chiefly Lady Helena's work. But I do not cherish revenge; I have no wish or intention of punishing her for the injury she did me, therefore I have forgiven her; to forget is another matter, it is out of one's power. I shock you, I see, aunt Hester; but you will not wonder some day. When I have seen Captain Fortescue, and I earnestly hope to do so to-morrow, you shall know everything; that is, if it be as I fear."

Mrs. Wrenshaw felt anxious to know more; but she saw that it would be unkind and useless to question Hester further.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SOIRÉE AT MADAME ST. CHARLES'.

MADAME DE ST. CHARLES was a stout, well preserved widow, nearer sixty than fifty years of age; but as her hair was scarcely grey, and arranged in becoming close curls, so as to conceal the wrinkles about her eyes, she might have passed for a good deal younger, had she been thinner; directly she moved, her unwieldy size destroyed the youthful illusion of her face; and therefore Madame de Saint Charles moved as little as possible in society, and usually contrived to give her soirées when her young sister-in-law, Madame de Camille Laurent was paying her annual visit to Nardes.

For Madame de Camille Laurent received charmingly, and she knew it; and as her good middle-aged husband—she was very much attached to him, though he was twenty years her senior—was quite as fond of lively society as she was, they liked

their sister's little receptions, and greatly enhanced the amusement to themselves by encouraging her to mix her guests more unscrupulously than she would otherwise have done.

For it is to be understood that Madame de Saint Charles was noble, and that the prefix to the name of Camille Laurent was a genuine *de* not derived from the purchase of a small farm, dignified by the name *propriété*, some twenty acres in extent, the possessor having been originally a grocer or butcher named Duval or Dupont, the Jones and Browns of France; such things, as we know, are common enough in France, where the native impudence of one man will *ennoble* a whole family. But this family was really old, and had distinguished itself formerly both in camp and council. Madame de Saint Charles' grandfather had been a peer of France; but in the Revolution he had lost all, and although his daughter had swallowed her pride and married a wealthy avocat, when he died suddenly and left her a comparatively young widow, she found herself obliged to live with strict economy.

Her brother had been more fortunate, and had managed to keep his post through all the changes of dynasty. He was not rich; but he and his wife lived very comfortably in Paris, where, in right of their position by birth, they enjoyed the best society of the capital, and were far more liberal in their notions than their provincial sister, who, besides the distinction of feeling herself "the best blood in the town," had also the exclusiveness generally to be found in those who have lost caste by a *mésalliance*, and who are for ever trying to scramble up into their own place again; or at least to assert their high and mighty claims.

It became, then, a sort of *lutte* among those families in the town who were ambitious, to obtain invitations for these *soirées*. To Madame de Saint Charles' credit be it said, especially in an age like the present, she was no money worshipper, and, fond as she was of the English, she knew very well that the best appointed houses in the town, and the best hotel, were usually occupied by *parvenu* John Bull and his train of carriages and servants. Still she was sometimes deceived; people managed to get letters of introduction to her from others who ought never to have given them; and Mrs. Snody was one of these. With the quick discrimination of a Frenchwoman, Madame de Saint Charles would have been delighted to receive Mr. and Mrs. Wrenshaw; but she looked inquiringly at her sister as Madame de Camille

Laurent, gliding gracefully through the now assembling guests, came up to greet the new arrivals, headed by Mrs. Snody.

Madame de Camille Laurent had been roused from a confidential talk with her dear friend of the moment, Lady Helena Fortescue, by a subdued murmur of admiration.

She had hoped that Lady Helena would be the centre of attraction to all the young men, whom the fair deputy hostess was rather at a loss how to amuse—there were so many of them. In her kindness of heart, and her utter disregard of consequences—for, safe back in Paris (as she told her husband in the charming, sparkling way to which he never could refuse consent) what could it matter to them whom they had met at Nardes—she had invited several strangers. Men were scarce as yet, for the season was only beginning—I mean the sort of men Madame de Saint Charles thought worth inviting—but then, as Madame Camille justly argued,—

“Crinoline and head-dresses will not do alone; they must be talked to, or I shall lose my reputation for arranging the most charming *soirées* of Nardes.”

And, among others, she had been graciously pleased to persuade her husband to invite our little *douanier*, Monsieur Simon, not, as she explained with much fluency to her scrupulous sister-in-law, in regard of his position—that was of course inadmissible—but as a poet and a man who might be an honour to his native town.

“In Paris,” she said, “we adore genius; it opens all doors, let the possessor be whom he will; and believe me, no *soirée* ever goes so well, or with so much spirit, as where there are artists, authors, poets—people, in short, who, being constantly obliged to use their mental faculties, have them always bright and ready; their tongues are not rusted, or their ideas either.”

This was a hyperbolic view of Monsieur Simon, but he had won Madame Camille's good graces the year before by jumping into the water, or rather stepping knee-deep into it, after her parasol, thereby damaging his new *pantalon*, and had afterwards written some verses on the occasion in the *Messenger*; and although sweet Madame Camille was not vain—for a Frenchwoman—still she could not forget (who does really?) the self-devotion he had shown—and this was her reward.

M. Simon had been standing hitherto in mute but ecstatic contemplation of his dark-browed idol, Lady Helena, the tallest woman in the room, and of course in his estimation the best

worth looking at, although most men would have preferred the slighter make, the charmingly piquant face, and graceful winning manner of Madame Camille herself. She was very pretty by candle-light. Her *mâte* complexion was then of a dazzling whiteness; her luxuriant raven-black hair, brought round her head in a coronet without any other ornament, and her plain white dress of some soft gauzy fabric, showed to advantage her lovely neck and arms. She might have been called too pale; but the brilliant red of her lips, which seemed ever smiling, relieved this, as did also the animated expression of her soft long brown eyes.

Lady Helena had far more regular features—more *tint*, as Monsieur Simon would have said; her figure was more finely developed. She looked well in repose; but then she was overdressed, and her insufferably haughty expression was still more apparent beside the smiling, courteous Frenchwoman.

She, too, had remarked the buzz and earnest gaze directed towards the post where Madame de Saint Charles sat enthroned; but she saw some ladies entering, and Lady Helena was not inquisitive. She had come alone that evening, her husband having also gone to the review at St. Arlaix. Madame Camille had expressed herself *au désespoir*.

“I know you English always prefer to go out with your husbands,” she said, just before she left her friend.

And then Lady Helena felt it dull to be alone. She liked society, although in her now impoverished circumstances she could no longer receive; and she cared for admiration and adoration rather more than ever, because, perhaps, she felt her charms were waning, only she did not to-night approve of that little Monsieur Simon’s presence. He had been hovering about her at a respectful distance ever since her arrival at Nardes some months ago, and so let him hover. She had no objection to that, but to find him in a *salon*, so near to her that every moment she expected he might speak, was more than she liked.

She turned round to see if he were still there.

He was gone, and not alone. The whole bevy of gentlemen, hitherto clustered like a group of devotees on a fête day before the image of the saint commemorated, had disappeared; there was no one near Lady Helena but old, toothless M. Dupuy, with his red ribbon and his snuff-box, and she turned away much more quickly than usual, lest he should take her glance for an invitation to come and talk to her.

Spite of her pride and indifference, she could not help looking across the room to discover the cause of this unusual desertion.

She heard M. de Camille Laurent's singular voice—a mixture of bass and falsetto—with which he seemed to be singing a perpetual duet with himself, speaking in his most adulatory tones to some one, near whom there were so many gentlemen that it was impossible to see through them. After a time, and when, in compliment to the English visitors, tea was brought, Madame de Camille again approached, bearing a cup of tea herself for this distinguished guest, loaded so plentifully with sugar that the topmost lump was visible, and which she assured her friend she had *sucree* for her herself, as English people liked everything sweet.

"I never drink sugar, thank you," said Lady Helena, ungraciously. She had just through the group of men caught a vision of a very beautiful woman engaged in animated conversation with Madame de Saint Charles and her brother, and felt extremely annoyed and neglected. The face seemed familiar, but she could not recall where she had seen it, and yet that stately but graceful head, its fair, waving hair brushed back from the temples, those delicate features and singularly transparent skin, were sufficiently remarkable to be recollected. Lady Helena felt sure that her rival—for it was, doubtless, this new star that had robbed her of her admirers—was a distinguished person; there was no possibility of mistaking her style—it was perfect.

"Who is that," she asked Madame Camille, "talking to your husband?"

"Ah, that lovely creature, she is English; possibly among your friends, Mrs.—Mrs.—*comment*, I forget your English names, it is Hallam, I think, and the lady with her, Mrs. Rainshaw."

The name was said plainly enough for Lady Helena, and set every nerve quivering with jealous pride. This was Frederic Hallam's despised wife.

"Has she a husband here?" she asked.

We never really forgive those we have injured, or, if we think we do, we cannot endure that they should stand well in the opinion of others; she resolved to make sure of this stranger's identity with Frederic Hallam's low-born wife, and if it were as she thought, she would take very good care not to be troubled with Hester's presence in any *salon* she might honour with hers.

"I do not know ; I never saw her before. She came with a Madame Snody—*tenez, la voilà.*"

"Mrs. whom do you say ?" said Helena Fortescue, as a loud-talking, handsomely-dressed woman emerged from the group, and advanced towards them.

"That is Mrs. Snody," said Madame Camille, with a doubtful smile. "I do not think she is of your *société* ; she is a cousin of some gentleman who has been a lord mayor, and my husband tells me your lord mayor is not a person of the highest distinction."

"No, not exactly." Lady Helena felt too much annoyed to laugh, as M. de Camille Laurent, speaking excellent English, approached, beside the cousin of a former lord mayor. Mrs. Snody now seated herself beside her titled countrywoman in a flutter of delight at finding herself on equal terms with any one who was a lady in her own right.

But although he persevered at first in speaking English, Mrs. Snody was not going to lose such a chance of displaying her French ; perhaps she took the opportunity of practising it in the hope of improvement. With all his politeness, her accent was so detestable that Monsieur de Camille Laurent could scarcely understand her.

She was trying to make him comprehend that she had a son with her, whom she had wished to bring to the party, but that "*pauvre chose, il a le mal à les dents—pauvre chose, pauvre chose !*" she repeated, shaking her head, and appealing to Lady Helena.

The polite Frenchman bowed and looked concerned and mystified ; but Lady Helena was less courteous. She saw that directly he went away Mrs. Snody would attack her. She looked at Monsieur de Camille Laurent, and laughed.

"It is *incroyable*, is it not ?" she said, "Will you gratify my curiosity, and take me to see those lovely flowers ?" and, rising, she swept past her countrywoman, and left her in disappointed solitude.

Much as Hester had shrunk from the idea of meeting Lady Helena, when once she had determined to accompany her aunt, she had also resolved to address her enemy, should she have the opportunity of doing so ; and when she saw the moderate-sized room, and how people moved about, rarely remaining fixed long anywhere, she made up her mind that it would be easily effected.

When she first entered, she had been amused with the sensation her appearance created, and then she had been interested in observing the tasteful decorations of the room.

She found herself very soon acquainted with almost every one, and was just going to ask for Lady Helena when she saw her with M. de Camille Laurent.

Helena Fortescue gave her a cold scrutinizing glance as she passed on towards some flowers, grouped in a species of alcove which formed one end of the room.

To her surprise the glance was firmly returned, and Hester bowed—bowed, not in any timid or deprecating manner, but with a sweet condescending smile.

For the first time in her life the proud woman was surprised out of her self-possession; she returned a stately courtesy, and when M. de Camille Laurent asked if she had known that charming Mrs. Hallam in England, she hesitated in her reply, not from fear, but from an unusual prudence.

He was evidently a great admirer of beauty, and yet he was not as devoted to her as she considered fitting; he had married a young wife, and therefore youthful charms would be sure to attract him, and he was just now the leading man at Nardes. On the whole, she thought it safer and wiser to tell Madame de Camille Laurent about Hester's antecedents, and not her husband.

"Yes; she is a pretty creature, is she not? You French gentlemen are more easily pleased than our English ones. Mrs. Hallam would be more a lady's beauty in England than a gentleman's."

They had reached the end of the room, and, turning again, were just repassing Hester.

Hester looked up at M. de Camille Laurent with one of her rare but winning smiles.

"I have already forgotten," she said as he stood before her awaiting her commands, for he imagined, too, that Lady Helena would wish to speak to her countrywoman, "the name of this beautiful village you say we ought to visit?"

"You must not stand," said Madame de Saint Charles, and she made room on her sofa for Helena Fortescue between herself and Hester.

It was not a large party; although the room was small, it might have been much fuller, and nearly all the men were gathered round the new idol. At first Helena had thought that

by persisting in her isolation, she should mark her contempt for her rival, and finally triumph, but a nearer glimpse of Hester's beauty had stimulated her audacity, and she resolved to place herself near her, and carry away her admirers, as it were, by a *coup-de-main*.

Hester just waited for M. de Camille's answer, although she did not take in the sense of what he said ; she was so afraid of missing the chance of speaking to Lady Helena.

"Is your brother here with you?" she asked, in the easy, straightforward manner in which we address an intimate, rather than a person seen only once, and then under painful circumstances.

Helena Fortescue had expected resentment, fear, reproaches, anything rather than this lofty equality, asserted, too, in a tone as polished as her own; perhaps for the first time she was dealing with a woman whose power of self-control was stronger than hers; for there was no trace of resentment in Hester's countenance, and she felt her own brow was lowering; if she could have believed such an impossibility, she would have said this country girl despised her.

"You mean, I imagine," she said, haughtily—for at any rate the by-standers should not say that she treated Mrs. Hallam as an equal,—“Mr. Fortescue's brother: are you acquainted with him?”

Hester smiled.

"You have a short memory, I see," she said—it was useless now to keep up an appearance of cordiality, although she was resolved to curb any outward betrayal of anger—"Captain Percy Fortescue is my husband's most intimate friend."

"Ah, and you are, therefore, deeply interested in him."

"No," she could not help colouring slightly, "but I should like to see him on business if he is in Nardes."

There was a slight quiver in her voice, which betrayed that her indifference was assumed.

A hundred conjectures flashed through the other's brain; but whether any of them were true or false, she was resolved Percy Fortescue should not meet her; it would be an excellent way of ridding herself of this girl, whom she began to hate—to put her on a false scent.

"He left Nardes, yesterday, with my husband, but he will not return here; I think he is bound for the Italian lakes, and will possibly go on to Sicily." Now Captain Fortescue had

left it undecided whether he should not return before he went on further.

"Are you sure of this?" said Hester, fixing her eyes upon her; "perhaps you have his next address?" she said, after a pause.

"I regret to say I have not," said Helena, regaining her self-command as the other became earnest. "It is a pity, is it not, when you are so deeply interested to know where he is to be found?"

Her sneer brought a deep flush to Hester's face, but the next instant she raised her head loftily,—

"I *am* deeply interested in knowing where Captain Fortescue is to be found; you are quite right in thinking so, Lady Helena, and I shall really be thankful to you, if you can help me in my search."

There was no possibility of mistaking Hester as she said this. Her face spoke the most perfect purity and dignity, and Helena's eyes fell before its earnest glance.

"I have told you all I can about the matter," she said, sul-
lenly, and turning completely away.

The surrounding group, if they had not understood all that passed, had diligently studied the two faces, and had rightly read a noble independence in the one, and jealous dislike in the other; for, to do Helena justice, mere want of birth would not have provoked her insolence, unless her passions were previously roused. She could be a lady when she chose to show herself one.

Monsieur Simon had got into conversation with Mrs. Wrenshaw, to whom he expressed his devoted admiration of her niece, so that she had scarcely remarked Hester's earnest conversation; but now following the douanier's eyes, she saw the flush on Hester's cheek, and overheard her last words.

As soon as she could, she spoke to her by way of interrupting what she felt sure was painful when she saw who was her companion, thereby crowning Monsieur Simon's happiness. Ah yes, he was right when those eyes smiled at him; they were far sweeter than Lady Helena's; they were not certainly so much "*des yeux de keepsake*," but he felt less afraid of them, and then he asked Hester if she meant to bathe.

No, she had no present intention of doing so.

He was disappointed to find some exaggerated compliments unappreciated.

He could not have imagined that blue eyes could have looked so cold, so indifferent to his admiration.

He had been about to compose a poem, comparing Hester to a golden-haired Nereide, but then as he reflected, sea-nymphs might be justly supposed colder than more earthly beings, and her queen-like manner completed her charms in his eyes. Poor little fellow, he was hopelessly in love before the end of the evening, and so were all the rest, and yet Hester gave them no encouragement; but the heart of a Frenchman is inflammable, only, like lucifer matches, the blaze is soon out and over.

There was something about Hester that kept even Frenchmen at a distance, intense and unbounded as is their admiration for beauty, and especially that of fair English women. They seemed to content themselves with mute worship, after having exchanged a few words with her. She received their homage with such perfect indifference—as so completely her due, that their vanity was not in any way flattered, and if she had not been so rarely beautiful, as Frenchmen they would probably have found this wearisome; but then, although indifferent, she was not haughty; and Lady Helena, as each moment she perceived more fully the universal court paid to Mrs. Hallam, looked darker and sterner than she had ever looked before, as the poetical Monsieur Simon whispered to one of his friends,—

“Like Medea beside Creusa, or Queen Eleanor and Rosamond Clifford.”

Her ill-temper stiffened her face, and contracted her brows, and at last finding the position she occupied utterly intolerable, she left the party early, without having had the opportunity she desired of warning Madame de Camille Laurent against Hester.

Her departure was a great relief to Mrs. Snody, who had felt thoroughly snubbed ever since Lady Helena laughed at her.

She came across to the others now, she had been afraid to move before—what is it that makes some people stationary as statues, as if they had paid for one particular chair, and meant to keep it?—and addressed herself to Monsieur de Camille Laurent.

“*Aimes tu cette dame, monsieur?*” she said, in her loud voice.

Every one looked round, and several of the gentlemen smiled; but Mrs. Snody went on unconsciously,—

“*Est-ce qu'elle te plait, à toi,*” she said, with emphasis.

It was impossible to help laughing. Even the ever polite

M. de Camille Laurent smiled so apparently, that Mrs. Snody began to see she had made some serious mistake ; and Hester, suffering for her countrywoman, whispered to her aunt that she thought they had better go, as it was getting late ; and under cover of the compliments and regrets this produced, Mrs. Snody's victim escaped her, while the rest of the party consoled themselves for the absence of the English ladies by an exciting game at *lansquenet*.

CHAPTER XV.

A FISSURE IN THE ROCK.

WELL might Hester have seemed strangely cold and indifferent to the admiration she had excited. Only her pride sustained her from betraying utter despair, when she found that her hope of seeing Captain Fortescue was fruitless ; but there was an expression in his sister-in-law's eyes, before which she would sooner have died than evinced any emotion. She would heap scorn for scorn on the woman who had again insulted her. She was too overwrought, and too free from vanity to value the triumph she had gained in robbing Helena Fortescue of her admirers, and driving her from the field ; but still it was gratifying to feel that they had met as equals, and that she had felt herself superior to her enemy.

But as soon as she and her aunt were alone in their apartments, all this was forgotten. What should she do now ? She stood still in the middle of the salon clasping her hands together, and trying to think. But in the agony of fear lest Fortescue should escape her, thought swayed restlessly, it seemed impossible to reconcentrate it. Suddenly an idea started from the confusion as clearly as if a ray of light had fallen on it alone. Lady Helena knew where to find Captain Fortescue, only she had resolved to withhold this knowledge—how was she to force it from her ? She saw that, with such a character, nothing but submission would avail, and could she bend to her ? Yes, she could do anything to know whether Fortescue had been aware of her husband's conduct. Could she persuade her aunt to go to Lady Helena (she knew very well she could not bring herself to do it) and get the information she wanted ? She would try.

"You are wondering why I keep you here, aunt, when I said just now it was late. I must speak to you before we separate to-night. You saw me with Lady Helena? Well, she and I had best not meet again; but I want you to go to her to-morrow."

"Me, my dear child?" exclaimed Mrs. Wrenshaw; "why, she does not know who I am."

"You can say you come from me, to entreat her as a favour to give the address of her brother-in-law, Captain Fortescue."

Mrs. Wrenshaw looked at Hester, surprised and anxious.

"What is this gentleman to you, Hester, that you are so eager to see him," for she remembered her niece's previous question.

"He was, and is, I believe, my husband's dearest friend."

"And is it by Mr. Hallam's request you are seeking him now?"

"No, it is not," said Hester. She felt desperate, hemmed in by obstacles on all sides, which it seemed impossible to remove.

"Hester," her aunt spoke very seriously, "I love you, and trust you; but it seems to me that I cannot act blindfold in these matters. Supposing that I obtained this address for you, what would be your next step?"

"I shall immediately write to Captain Fortescue, or, if he is not very far off, get you to take me to him."

"I cannot promise to do it," said Mrs. Wrenshaw; "at any rate, not till I have consulted your uncle."

"Aunt Hester," she said, passionately, "you do not know what you are about, if you hinder me now. Uncle Wrenshaw's return may be delayed, and Captain Fortescue will have travelled far away, where my letter may be weeks reaching him. Speed is my only hope—it is the only thing I ever asked of you, aunt Hester," she said, in a tone of vehement reproach; "and, if you knew the consequences, you would not refuse."

Mrs. Wrenshaw was strangely perplexed; this mystery and agitation formed such a new feature in her tranquil life, that it seemed more like a dream than reality. She paused to think.

"Then you refuse to help me," said Hester, passionately, although her will could not believe that it was at length resisted.

"Listen to me and calm yourself, Hester," and Mrs. Wrenshaw sat down quietly. "Things cannot go on in this way any longer between us—it is impossible for me not to be aware that there is some serious cause of difference between yourself and your husband." Hester started. "At first I did not press for

your confidence, because it seems to me that, in trials of this kind, any third person's interference is unwise, and often increases the trouble, whatever it may be; but now that you are about to consult a stranger, a young unmarried man, who has no claim on your confidence, I tell you plainly, that you would do more wisely to consult me instead."

"I cannot," she said, wildly, and scarcely knowing what she said, for the strain upon her self-control during the evening had weakened its power, and she was swayed by the tempest of passion she had hitherto kept in check. "You cannot help me—you cannot prove my husband's innocence or guilt. Oh, God help me!" she exclaimed suddenly, as if maddened by her powerlessness to persuade. "Oh, aunt Hester—aunt Hester, I will tell you all, and then you must help me—you cannot refuse."

She threw herself on the ground beside Mrs. Wrenshaw, and burying her face in her lap, poured out the whole story of her wrongs, beginning from her marriage, and ending with Goldsmith's last accusation against her husband.

Her aunt listened, sad and hushed. And she had thought that Hester, grown careless in her happiness, had given up her relations, because she was so attached to her husband that she cared for no love but his.

She asked her gently now why this had been.

"Do you think I could bear you should all know my misery?" was the proud answer.

"But, if I understand you rightly, your husband's conduct has been kind and affectionate since you have lived at Uplands; has there been no decided reconciliation between you?"

"No, how could I trust him again when he had deceived me so cruelly?"

"And yet from your own showing you were about to do so when you saw Mr. Goldsmith?"

"It was a folly, a weakness, and I have been justly punished for yielding to it. Why should I forgive a man who has poisoned all my belief in human nature, who has never even asked for forgiveness?"

"Hester! it seems to me your husband has by his conduct been offering the truest atonement. I fear, my poor child, that your unforgiveness towards him equals his first error."

"I might have expected this," said Hester, raising her head proudly; "every one has always been against me ever since I was born; no one has ever loved me——"

"Hester, dear, you are not yourself now, and that makes you unjust," said her aunt soothingly.

"And," continued Hester, interrupting her, "does not this discovery show that I have been right, and that he is not to be trusted?"

"Even if this is true," said Mrs. Wrenshaw, firmly, "who shall say that your tenderness and the happiness of his home might not have preserved him from further temptation? But, Hester, how did your husband reply to this charge?"

Hester looked up bewildered.

"I do not understand you," she said; "my husband was not present when Mr. Goldsmith told me this."

"Yes, but on your return home, when you repeated to him what you had heard."

"I said nothing to him, aunt Hester; I left him as soon as possible afterwards."

Mrs. Wrenshaw drew back with the sudden repugnance with which we shrink from seeing the faults of those we love.

"Hester," she said, in a tone of such deep feeling that her niece raised herself in fully wakened attention, "do you know what you have done? You have not shown your husband as much mercy as is vouchsafed to the worst criminals; in the pride of your own judgment, you have condemned him unheard."

Hester started to her feet.

"You are mistaken," she said, harshly; "I have not entirely condemned him till I have seen Captain Fortescue."

"Do not wait for that, my dear child, as you value your future happiness, but hasten back to Uplands; if your uncle were here, he would tell you better than I can, that we do not trust in Mr. Goldsmith, or believe him to be quite an honest man. I have never seen your husband, but from what you tell me of his conduct during these three years, both to his wife and child, I am inclined to believe him the best man of the two. Does he go to church, Hester?"

She blushed deeply, as her aunt's meaning flashed upon her.

"I believe he thinks far more about all those things than I do, since he has seen so much of Mr. King, our clergyman; but I don't see any use in it, if he has been deceiving me all the time."

"Why will you not force yourself to believe him innocent? to me it seems plain that he is so; are you sure that you do not really think so too, only you cannot bear to own that your

judgment has been in fault." Hester shook her head, but her aunt went on: "I think you are in too agitated a state to return at present; if you will be guided by me, you will write at once to your husband, entreating him to pardon your harsh unforgiveness and headstrong wilfulness. Oh, Hester if you love him still, and I think you do, can it be difficult to make any sacrifice to produce such happiness as you have never yet had in marriage? I have known the truest happiness for twenty years, and I tell you that no other earthly joy can weigh against it for a moment. Think what you are risking; how do you know that your husband will forgive you, if you insult him by persisting in this doubt of his honour?"

Frederic's parting look and words came back to Hester then.

"He does not know I doubt his honour now, and he loves me too well not to forgive me," she said dreamily, and then stood thinking.

Mrs. Wrenshaw did not interrupt her; she earnestly hoped that a stronger power than hers would yet bring this unhappy, erring pair together again, although Hester's conduct was incomprehensible to her gentler nature.

After a while Hester said,—

"I cannot go back till I have seen Captain Fortescue; you do not understand how full of doubt I am. He was with my husband during that visit to London, and he could not have deceived him; besides, Mr. Goldsmith said Captain Fortescue knew everything. If he will tell me this is false, then I will believe Mr. Goldsmith is a dishonest man, and he can no longer have the direction of our affairs. I will consent to wait till my uncle's return; I am sure he will see matters as I do. Do not feel angry with me, aunt Hester," she said, as her aunt turned sadly away. "I love and respect you for all you have said, and I will think of it, but I have never found myself wrong yet. It is very hard to feel that I have been so now; you must give me time."

CHAPTER XVI.

A TRUE FRIEND.

MRS. WRENSHAW looked earnestly at Hester when she came in to breakfast next morning, but she saw no signs of relenting in her contracted forehead and tightly-compressed lips. Poor girl!

her head ached, and her whole soul was weary; she longed for peace, but she could not bring herself to see, among the tangled skein her own self-will and self-love had meshed around her, the only clue (for humility generally keeps itself like its emblem, the violet, out of sight) which would have led her safely to her rest.

All through the day she continued in a restless silence; the only allusion her aunt ventured to make to the subject was by asking her if she meant to write to England. "Not yet," was the hard, repelling answer, and Mrs. Wrenshaw felt it was best to leave her to herself; she could pray for her, but she saw that further discussion would do more harm than good.

She thought her husband might return on the evening of the next day, and she told Hester so on the following morning.

"If he does not, aunt Hester, I can wait no longer," was her abrupt reply.

There had been rain on the previous day, so that they had only taken a quiet evening walk up the street in which their hotel was situated, one end of which joined the *jetée*, and the other stretched away into the high road beyond the town. But this morning, as there was broad sunshine, and all looked bright and tempting out-of-doors, Mrs. Wrenshaw proposed a walk: she thought it would be of use to Hester, and divert her thoughts from their fixed melancholy. She had shopping to do, she said, and they would go to the market and buy some flowers before the sun faded them.

They had bought several bouquets made of mignonette and clove carnations edged with a profusion of jasmine, arranged with exquisite taste, and they were just turning into the milliner's, who, having heard already of the beautiful English lady, was delighted beyond measure to see her enter, when Hester, who was following her aunt, looked round, and started suddenly.

Standing close beside her, in conversation with a French gentleman, was Captain Fortescue.

Her aunt looked back for her, but Hester did not move or speak—she seemed spell-bound.

His friend soon left him, and Fortescue was moving on quickly when she sprang forward, uttering his name. He turned, and mechanically raised his hat, but he evidently did not recognize her.

"Will you wait for me one moment?" She spoke hurriedly, and then, joining her aunt, asked her if she would at once return.

to the hotel with her, or if she should take Captain Fortescue there alone.

Poor Mrs. Wrenshaw was frightened. She had so hoped all would have gone on quietly until her husband's return, but when she looked in Hester's face, she saw there was no chance of delay.

Excusing herself to the disappointed, expectant milliner, she followed Hester, who had already recalled herself to Fortescue's memory, and asked him to accompany her home.

As he walked beside her, it seemed difficult for him to believe this beautiful, lofty-mannered woman the Hester Hallam of three years ago, and Fortescue felt that what had been to him her greatest charm—her fresh *naïveté*—was gone for ever.

She seemed to have grown ten years older, and, beautiful as she was, he thought the expression of her face too firm and decided for that of a woman.

Mrs. Wrenshaw placed herself quietly near one of the windows as soon as they reached their room, and Hester, without pausing to seat herself or to request her companion to do so, asked him abruptly if he remembered meeting her husband in London in the previous year.

"Perfectly," he said, rather surprised by her earnest manner; "and, Mrs. Hallam, I ought to compliment you on the change matrimony has wrought in him," and he smiled.

She looked impatient.

"Stop, Captain Fortescue; this is no time for idle compliments. I have been told that you knew that my husband was betting deeply at that time, and had much involved himself in debt."

He started in such utter and unfeigned surprise that she could not doubt him.

"Your husband—and, Mrs. Hallam, I would stake my life upon his honour—told me most positively when I last saw him that he had entirely ceased to bet since he had lived at Uplands, and owed no man anything. Stay," he added, as a dark suspicion awakened, "who told you this, Mrs. Hallam? As my name was called in question, I have a right to ask."

"Mr. Goldsmith told me," she said; her heart was beating so wildly with hope and fear that she could scarcely stand without support, and she grasped at the back of a chair.

Fortescue saw her agitation; he began to understand that something serious lay under this, to him, unnatural conduct on a wife's part.

"You had better sit down, Mrs. Hallam," he said, kindly; he looked across at Mrs. Wrenshaw, who was sitting behind her niece, but so far off as not to mingle in the conversation; but she only shook her head, as if to say she had better not speak.

He seated himself, and Hester followed his example mechanically.

"I expected that only such an unprincipled scoundrel could have coined such a falsehood. When I last saw my dear friend Hallam," he felt just then a double love for the man who seemed to be abandoned by his wife, and a wife who he felt sure was deeply loved by him; "I also saw Goldsmith, and he tried to make me believe the story you have mentioned; but you will excuse me if I say I was not so ready of belief, and I was so convinced that Goldsmith meant ill to your husband, that before I left town I wrote to him at Uplands, urging him to be on his guard and to have the state of your property clearly ascertained; I never received an answer to that letter. Perhaps, as I left town soon after, it may have gone astray; I only hope mine fulfilled its purpose.

Thought upon thought, memory on memory, crowded upon Hester till mental sight was blinded, and all was darkness. She looked vacantly at Fortescue, and pressed one hand on her forehead, as if she were seeking the key of this mystery.

"But what," she said at last, slowly and painfully, "could have been his motive in slandering my husband to me?"

"I cannot tell, there might be many reasons; it is better, far better, Mrs. Hallam, that I should not know any details. Of one thing I am quite sure: if, as from your manner I fear, there has been no explanation with Goldsmith, you ought not to lose a moment in returning to England, and urging your husband to take legal advice in the matter. I believe your presence is absolutely necessary for this, or I would offer to go to England for you, as I could travel faster than it would be well for you to do. I am not speaking without warrant; since I left London things have come to my knowledge which make me sure that Goldsmith is not to be trusted, that he is a ruined man; but," he added, suddenly looking full at her, "as I said before, I would venture my life on your husband's honour, and his love for his wife and child."

The words were spoken involuntarily in strong indignation against the woman who could trust the words of so false a man as he deemed the lawyer, uttered against her husband's good

faith, for although he was of course ignorant of much, he could broadly guess the main facts of what had happened.

"You wrote to warn my husband," she said, as if thinking aloud. "Yes—yes—your letter must have come when our child was ill, and, doubtless, Fred threw it aside, scarcely taking in its contents. I see you blame me, Captain Fortescue, and you are right; but it was hard to believe a man faithless in whom my father placed such implicit trust, and who had not deceived me."

Crushed as she was by this revelation, it had not yet done its work; like all unimpulsive natures, she was slow to receive impressions, and she could not bear to see her fault or to own it.

Fortescue bit his lip; it was not his place to teach her; once before, when his feelings for her were far different, he had been sufficiently rebuked for interference; besides, there was her aunt to advise her. So he suppressed the answer that he longed to make, for she roused his deep indignation.

"If I can be of any service to you in the business, for Hallam's sake, do not scruple to employ me;" then, seeing that she took no notice, he went up to Mrs. Wrenshaw, and begged her earnestly to hasten her niece's departure. "She scarcely realises how much depends upon it," he whispered, and, taking a formal leave of Hester, he departed, wondering at the change years had brought, and thinking how utterly miserable such a woman must make both her husband and herself, spite of all attractions of mind and person, for he was not a man to have considered her fortune one of Hester's charms—if he had married, it would have been for happiness, not money.

And then he thought of Fred, and wondered how much misery he had known; and amid all came the bitter remembrance that he had been the means of introducing him to Goldsmith.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALMOST CONQUERED.

LONG after Fortescue had left her, Hester remained in the same dull stupor. Reaction had at length succeeded to the over-excitement and agitation of the past week, and she was for some time literally unable to rouse herself.

At first Mrs. Wrenshaw left her quiet, but when for more

than an hour she had remained in the same silent, motionless attitude, she bent over her and kissed her, stroking her fair hair with a soft caressing movement.

But no tears came, she only sighed heavily.

At last she took her aunt's hand, and kissed it quietly.

"You see you were right, aunt Hester, and I was wrong. You, who are good and humble, cannot tell what it costs me to say this. Forgive me! I would not listen to your gentle persuasion, and Captain Fortescue was determined I should be convinced. He did not spare me. Well," she added, drawing herself up, "I suppose he had a right to be angry. He has been a true friend where I have been faithless; believing when I doubted; but then he has never been deceived. Now, do not look sad, aunt Hester; I have learned a lesson to-day which will keep me from hard judgment and doubt for a long time to come. I will go back to Fred to-morrow."

"God bless you, my dear, dear child," said her aunt, who could not control her tears, and she drew Hester fondly to her as she whispered, "And you will ask his forgiveness, will you not, my darling, for all that has gone before?"

Hester drew back.

"I will not deceive you," she said. "I have been wrong to take any one's word against my husband, without giving him the opportunity of justifying himself, and wrong to leave him as I did. I see this plainly now, and for this I will ask his pardon as earnestly as you could wish; but stay," she continued, as her aunt again kissed her, in the fulness of her joy, "I know you will not be satisfied when you have heard all, and yet I cannot help it. I cannot see that I have been to blame in estranging myself from him for what he did at first. He had sinned deeply against me. You surely do not mean to say that I was to trust him at once, as if he had never proved himself unworthy——"

"There is no use in arguing about bygones, Hester; but, as you ask me, I think in your place, and loving your husband as you did once, I should have felt unable to give up the hope of winning his love by the fervour and strength of my own. It is very difficult for one person to judge for another in matters of feeling, as we are none of us alike; but I am quite sure you were wrong to nourish resentment during three years; and I think, dearest, you would lay a surer foundation for future happiness if you could think you needed pardon for it."

"I cannot be a hypocrite," said Hester, turning away. "I

am willing to weigh that against his first deceit, and consider them both cancelled ; I cannot promise more, and, indeed, I think, aunt Hester, we may be happy now."

"God grant you may," said her aunt.

She turned round and kissed Mrs. Wrenshaw more warmly than she had yet done, and her aunt tried to feel satisfied there was no use in urging her further. God's mercy alone, she thought, could fully soften that proud heart, and in His own good time, she doubted not that it would be done. In the meantime, her own heart overflowed with thankfulness at the prospect of this speedy reconciliation, for from what Hester had said of her husband, she believed he would be satisfied with any, the slightest, atonement on her part. It was strange to Mrs. Wrenshaw when she thought of her previous feelings to Frederic Hallam, and of the warm love which had suddenly sprung up in her heart towards him.

It seemed to Hester now as if to-morrow morning would never come. She rang for Françoise, and superintended her packing with an interest that surprised that active, but sorely disappointed damsel. She had a great mind to turn restive, and refuse to return to England, for she had already found several attractions at Nardes ; but Hester was not a mistress to be trifled with : besides, she kept her so constantly employed, that she had no leisure even to speculate on the advantages and disadvantages of such a plan.

Night came at last, and for the first time since she left England, Hester slept soundly ; and she looked so different next morning, that her aunt congratulated her on her improved appearance.

She was in much brighter spirits too ; she had not written to Frederic, she said ; she should telegraph her arrival in England, and ask him to meet her at the Uplands station. At first she had thought of waiting for him in London, but as she could travel home by a shorter route across country, she thought it might be better for them before they took any decided steps with regard to Goldsmith to talk the matter over at Uplands ; for Mrs. Wrenshaw urged upon her the prudence of not giving the lawyer any warning of her purpose. She did not scruple to tell her niece, that after what Captain Fortescue had said, she believed Goldsmith had purposely alienated her from her husband, in order to possess undivided control over her money, and then Hester remembered it was not till after she had desired him to purchase Uplands, that he had warned her against Fred.

Before she started, came a note from Captain Fortescue, offering, if he could be of any service, to accompany her to England.

Hester smiled faintly.

"No," she said to Mrs. Wrenshaw, "he means well, but I had rather be alone. I have much to think about before I reach Uplands. You will answer him for me, will you not, aunt Hester?"

One of Françoise's admirers was a waiter at the other hotel, and it soon transpired among the daily group of idlers, that the beautiful Mrs. Hallam was already leaving Nardes. Monsieur Simon was in gloomy despair. He had composed three verses of his poem, but the other two were restive: the ideas, as he told a friend whom he was holding tightly by the arm—were ready, were there, in fact, and he touched his forehead; but they were too grand, too magnificent to be restricted in conventional metre. He thought he must write it all over again in Alexandrines, and then seeing his friend smile, he crossed his arms gloomily over his chest, and drooped his chin upon them.

"You do not sympathize—you are not poet."

"No, *Dieu merci*, I am not; but still I understand what you mean. Pluck up courage, man; you're not the first by scores, who has found his brains larger than his tongue was glib. Let us go and see the last of your inspiration, it will freshen you up perhaps."

And when Hester stepped on to the deck of the steamer, she found herself surrounded by her admirers, who bowed an enthusiastic farewell.

Mrs. Wrenshaw would gladly have accompanied her to England, but she was now in hourly expectation of her husband's arrival, and she could not leave Nardes without his consent.

"Good-bye, aunt," Hester said, as they finally parted, "you have been very good to me. Sometimes I think that if I had the reverence for my husband that you have for yours, I might be a happier woman."

The white cliffs were soon in sight, and Hester's heart beat quicker and quicker, with a joyful anticipation she no longer tried to subdue, though it seemed so strange, so new to her, to indulge any loving or tender feeling towards her husband, that she could scarcely persuade herself it was not wrong to yield freely to it.

Hitherto in returning home, it had been Ralphie whose greeting she had thought over and longed for : now the child's image was almost obliterated beside the father's, grown so suddenly dear ; for she hardly yet owned to herself that she had never ceased to love him, although she had tried her utmost to stifle her love.

She telegraphed to Uplands before she took her seat in the train, which must now in a few hours bring her to her husband. She seemed to have lost all her usual calmness ; she consulted her watch constantly, and even put it to her ear, thinking it must have stopped.

Time went on slowly.

But as she approached nearer and nearer home, this excited joy subsided—there was her promise to her aunt, and Hester's rigid honour felt that, in all the rapture of meeting, it must be fulfilled.

She must explain her conduct to her husband, and ask his forgiveness for it. She wished now she had written from Nardes—but she had told him he would not hear from her for a week, and she had waited in the hope of seeing Fortescue first—a letter would have spared so much.

Supposing Fred had guessed, or in any way learned the truth, was deeply offended by her doubt, and received her coldly—sternly. She knew she could not humble herself before him—and then what would happen ? She almost wished she could return again to Nardes, and write him all, and then his anger would be over before she reached Uplands. What could have made her such a coward ? And then she thought of the parting look her husband had given her. No, he would not be stern or cold, although he might be deeply grieved that she could have doubted him. She half wished she had not made the promise. She believed so strongly now in her husband's love for her, that she felt she need only throw herself into his arms, and tell him she loved him, and all would be well, and he would never require an explanation of her conduct. But she had given the promise, and she must keep it, and she should keep it fairly and honourably, without taking advantage of Fred's affection. She should tell him at once ; before she confessed her love for him, he should hear of her fault.

Even yet she thought more of herself than of her husband.

The train sped on and on, and the movement renewed her excitement. Sometimes she felt as if the engine must be stopped at once, that she might have leisure to dwell more calmly on what

was before her; and then again she wished that several hours' journey still lay between her and her home. If she had had more time, she should be better able to judge exactly what she ought to do.

How apt we all are to forecast words and actions, never considering that all is over-ruled for us, and will be—if we only strive to act rightly, without in any way considering self—what is best.

At length, and as it seemed to Hester, sooner than she expected, and before her mind was decided, they reached the station. Her heart beat as if it would suffocate her.

She put her head out of the carriage window, and looked eagerly round—there was no one on the platform but some porters and the station-master. He did not see Mrs. Hallam, but beckoned to Martin as he got out, and taking him into a corner, talked with him for a few minutes.

Hester waited impatiently till Martin came up.

"What is it?" she said. "Where is your master?"

"He has not come himself to meet you, ma'am," said the man, touching his hat; "but your pony-carriage is here already."

She felt greatly disappointed. She had so counted on seeing Fred's face the moment she arrived; still it was a sort of reprieve, she had been thinking how painful it would be to delay her explanation, and yet she could not have made it till they reached home.

Martin asked if he should drive her, thinking she might feel fatigued after the journey, but she took the reins, saying it would do her good, and was soon going fast towards Uplands.

The road lay up the steep hill mentioned at the beginning of the volume; but instead of taking the bridle path, indicated by the finger-post, the carriage-way took a more circuitous route; descending the hill, and making a long sweep to the left, it arrived in a broad level road at the great iron gates, at the foot of the chestnut avenue.

This gate was visible a long way off, and the vane on the lodge glittered in the bright afternoon sun, making it look nearer than it was. The sunlight dazzled Hester's eyes as she strained them eagerly, in the hope that Fred might be waiting for her at the entrance gates. The weather had become much hotter since the morning: a few butterflies flew lazily from one sprig in the hedge to another; the gnats singing their sharp chorus louder than ever, and the green and blue dragon-flies flying in their

singular angles, and coming upon you when you least expected them, were the only things that seemed to rejoice in it. The ponies were almost maddened by the swarm of flies that followed their course.

Hester screened her eyes once more with her hand, and this time she fancied she saw some one by the gate.

The next moment she smiled at her own folly in imagining she could distinguish persons at such a distance. If there were any one, it was probably the lodge-keeper. Fred would be sure to bring Ralphie to meet her, and he would not bring him beyond the gates, out of the shadow of the trees in such blazing sunshine, for although the beams were becoming horizontal, the heat was still intense.

The white dust—the soil was chalky in this road—flew up in clouds, as the ponies, feeling themselves in sight of home and of freedom from the stings of their tormentors, dashed along at full speed—it was almost blinding, and made Hester long to be under the cool green shade of the avenue.

She could not see clearly before her for the dust now ; but as she reached the gates she knew that there was some one awaiting her, besides the old lame man who kept the lodge.

The gates were wide open, and the ponies went on rapidly, but Hester pulled them in and forced them to stop. Martin was at their heads in a moment.

She looked round.

Coming up to her from the gates were little Ralphie, Parkins, and Bevis.

Where was her husband ?

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHAT HAPPENED AT DRIVEN STATION.

ON the morning that Frederic Hallam left Uplands, with the intention of visiting Kirton's Farm, Jacob Bonham set out on his daily round in a more serious mood than usual.

Ever since Miss Hallam's visit to Stedding, he had remarked a depression in Lucy's spirits ; she was cheerful ; it would have been difficult to Lucy to be otherwise, so blessed was she with the habit of only seeing the best side of things ; but the old dreaming

fits, which the cares of house and children seemed to have almost banished, had returned, and with them a tendency to sigh, which Jacob thought marriage had cured.

On the previous evening he had spoken to her about this, and she had confessed to him that, from little hints Miss Hallam had let fall, and much more from what old Biz had seen and commented on, that Hester was not happy with her husband.

"And, Jacob," she said, bursting into tears, "you cannot think how I feel for her. She had such a joyless, dull childhood compared to mine; she knew so little love; and now, darling, to think of her being disappointed in the greatest of all human happiness, is more than I can bear."

Jacob drew her closer to him and kissed her; they were walking up and down their garden in the cool, dim evening light.

"But, dearest, I understand that your loving little heart—no, it's not a little heart, is it? it's a large full heart, which would love all the world if the world would only let it—I can quite understand that this seems hard to you, as you always want every one to be as happy as yourself; but, in the first place, you have no certain proof and, in the next, Hester has put it quite out of your power to help her."

"Ah, but that's it," said Lucy, looking up at her husband; "it seemed right to give way to you at the time, hard as it was; but I have been thinking lately, that you were so angry with Hester for paining me, and seeming to throw back my affection, that perhaps you did not judge as calmly as you usually do about things, and that if I had persevered, we might still have been friends."

"Then, really," said her husband, trying to smile her into a happier mood, "you have been grieving not to have been a more self-willed little woman than you usually are, which I consider a very superfluous regret; in fact, making a little goose of yourself."

Lucy shook her head.

"I can't laugh about it, dearest; it haunts me too much. You don't know Hester so well as I do. I was a dreamy, unrecollected, wild, unobservant creature, before I married you; but I always had what you call my quick insight into people's characters, and you can scarcely imagine the reserve of Hester's. I have thought a great deal over what old Biz has told me. She says Hester is haughty and proud and cold, and as grand as a queen; and that she never smiles, and seemed to avoid speaking of Mr. Hallam or of old times; and joining this to Miss Hallam's

unkind remarks, I feel sure my cousin is not happy. Now, Jacob, any woman must be happy whose husband loves her, whatever else may happen; and I believe that, instead of her having shrunk from us all from pride—it has been—well, it has been pride—but of an excusable kind: she could not bear our pity.”

“But still, Lucy, I cannot see how you could have prevented this.”

“Yes, Jacob; if I had persuaded you to let me write to her again and again, I should have conquered her at last. No one can resist affection when they are longing for it, and this must be the case with the poor thing, if matters are as I fear. If I had written, perhaps, she would have come to see us, or, at any rate, to Kirton’s Farm; and who knows, seeing us two so happy might have made Mr. Hallam fonder of her; now, you needn’t laugh and call me romantic; you know I’m very often right about love.”

“You’re almost always right, are you not?” said Jacob; “and now it’s supper-time.”

But, though through the rest of the evening he kept his wife’s attention too cheerfully amused for her to return to the subject, it weighed upon him during his morning’s drive.

He could not feel comfortable or altogether blameless; he remembered and understood more clearly now, his dread lest his wife should persevere in her entreaties to keep up a friendship with her cousin; he remembered also the secrecy he had on that account maintained about Peter’s hint of the Hallams’ intention of living at Kirton’s Farm—his fear that, if Lucy persevered in writing to Hester, it might become impossible to the latter to resist the longing to renew former ties and associations. Why had he feared and shrunk from all this?

Jacob was a far better man now than when he married Lucy Wrenshaw; is not any man the better for living with and loving a good religious woman? He had learned to look into his own heart and to be humbled by the sight of the hitherto unknown Evil there; he had learned to make the passive Good there act, and had, at any rate, made the active Evil passive, if he had not yet succeeded in uprooting it—a combat in which some of us may not triumph till the hour of death.

He was not so likely to be blinded by self-deceit now as on the night when he had determined to separate Lucy from her cousin; and a quick flush of shame burned on his cheek, as his then unworthy motives started into sight. Was it too late to

make atonement—too late to see if his sweet, loving wife might not be of use to Hester? He feared that if she wrote to her cousin now, it might seem as if she were courting her because she was rich, and it was hard for independent Jacob, who had never owed anything in his life to any man, to make up his mind to this.

But soon his conscience reminded him that he had just now wished the past undone; there could be no atonement without a sacrifice, and it would be better to bear even this stigma than not to make one effort towards reconciliation. Lucy had written once since to congratulate her cousin on Ralphie's birth; but the letter had been altered at his instigation into a formal, lifeless epistle, little likely to win Hester.

He roused himself, and found his horse had sunk into a dull, leisurely trot, very unlike his usual pace, for Jacob had rarely driven carelessly since his memorable upset in "the Copse Bit." He thought of it now as he caught himself "mooning," with the reins in his hands, and wondered what Lucy would say when she heard of it.

"And I have a stiff day's work before me, too," said the doctor; "no time for loitering."

He reached the common he was bound for, and, giving his horse to a ragged boy to hold, made his way to a group of squalid-looking huts inhabited by turf-cutters.

There were scores of children here, all suffering from that scourge of infancy—whooping-cough—which rarely leaves the healthiest child as it found him, and lays the seeds of disease and death in so many where it does not itself destroy.

It must have required a large stock of patience to listen to the complaints of these ignorant mothers, who were all far more ready to accuse the doctor for the slow progress towards recovery than to thank him for any alleviation his skill had procured their suffering little ones; and also it required considerable forbearance to find that his best remedies had in many cases been neglected and set aside for the nostrums of some old crone who passed for a "wise woman" in the locality.

But Jacob was used to this, and, though he could speak sternly where he saw neglect, or anything decidedly injurious to the patients, he generally had a kind word and a cheerful smile for all.

He had settled with Lucy to alter their dinner-hour and wait till six, as there was death in the house where he usually dined when on these long excursions, and he naturally avoided going

there, so that by the time he reached Driven Station on his way home, he was tired out, and exhausted.

There was a man waiting at the corner where the road branched off to the station; he touched his hat, and Jacob saw that it was Peter Stasson.

"What is it, Peter?" he said, checking his horse; "nothing the matter at the Farm, is there?"

He earnestly hoped there was not, for he was far too tired and hungry to wish to return upon his road.

"Nothing at the Farm, doctor," said Peter, looking very serious; "but you be wanted up yon', bad enough," he jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the station.

The man's manner puzzled Bonham, there was a sort of mystery about it.

He drove up the little ascent, and then waited till Peter came to hold the horse.

"Where do you mean, Peter?"

"Here, sir," said the man; "but I want to speak a word first. There was a gentleman in the 3. train, as had booked his ticket for Driven Station; but he was so bad when he got here, that he could neither speak nor stand; he just said, 'Kirton's Farm,' and they sent a boy down for me; and, to the best of my belief, sir, it's Muss Heaster's husband."

In a moment, Jacob was in the little waiting-room, and there, extended on as many chairs as they could find, a railway rug rolled under his head, was Frederic Hallam. Bonham had never seen him distinctly, but he felt sure from all he had heard that Peter was right in his conjecture.

He was not quite unconscious, but seemed in great suffering. He evidently knew that Jacob was a doctor, and seemed to be relieved by his presence.

Bonham stood meditating for some minutes after he had felt Hallam's pulse, and looked at him attentively, and then he walked out of hearing, and beckoned to the station-master to follow him.

"You sleep here, don't you?"

"Well, doctor, and what's that to do with it? you don't think I've got accommodation for a sick man, do ye?"

"No," said Jacob; "but I suppose you don't mind lending me a pillow, if you have one?"

The man grumbled, but after a bit, he produced a pillow, dirty certainly, but soft enough for Jacob's purpose.

With a broken chair and the pillow he managed to make a

reclining seat in the gig for the sick man, so that his head was supported, and then, with the help of the two men, he lifted him in, and telling Peter he was going to take Mr. Hallam to his own house for the present, he drove gently away.

At first he had felt strangely puzzled how to act. He feared that Hallam was on the brink of a serious illness, and he dared not incur the risk of taking him the long journey back to Uplands; besides, there was no train again till late in the evening, as that by which Hallam had meant to return had started while he lay ill and half unconscious before Jacob's arrival. He knew that the sick man had no friends in Stedding: it must be his duty to take him home, even at the risk of the illness proving infectious. He would have done as much for a stranger similarly circumstanced, for the county hospital was miles away, but Hallam had a double claim upon him, he was Lucy's cousin by marriage.

The air revived the sufferer: he was able to say a few words to Bonham, and when they reached the surgery, with Jacob's help and his assistant's, he walked to the parlour.

Making him lie down on the sofa, Jacob went in search of Lucy.

She was full of thankfulness that her husband should have been, as it were, sent that way in a time of such need, and had soon a bedroom ready close to their own. The children she sent at once to her mother's, telling Jacob she should go round in the afternoon and arrange for their remaining there, as she meant to nurse Mr. Hallam herself.

By the next day his symptoms had become so much more alarming, that Bonham, without waiting any longer for Hester, to whom they had at once written and despatched a telegraphic message, sent for a doctor from London; not choosing, although he felt competent to manage the case himself, to take the entire responsibility.

Next morning brought the doctor, but no letter or message from Uplands. However, by an early train arrived a servant with clothes for Mr. Hallam, and a letter from Parkins.

She would have come herself, she said, to nurse her master, but she dared not leave the child, or take him so long a journey without his parents' leave; besides, he was best away from a sick house. She then told them of Hester's sudden departure for France, adding that she had forwarded Mr. Bonham's letter and message to Arden, *poste restante*, as she did not know that her mistress had left any more definite address. She was sure she

would return at once, and she had written at the same time to say that Mr. Hallam was at Stedding, and with whom.

She added that no letter had come from Mrs. Hallam since her departure.

Jacob and Lucy looked at each other with sad, perplexed faces. Hallam was far too ill to be spoken to, or questioned on the subject. The doctor had entirely approved of Bonham's treatment, but had cautioned them that any excitement would make the delirious wandering from which he suffered during the night, continual and probably violent. Jacob had sat up in his room the previous night, and had been moved almost to tears by the fond endearing terms in which Hallam implored Hester to return to him, and be again the wife she was when he married her, and his earnest entreaties to forgive him, and give up her coldness, and show her real feelings for him.

There was much mingled in broken snatches that Jacob could not understand: allusions to Ralphie, who, he seemed to think, was with him also. And then he would start up suddenly, urging Hester to go to the child, who needed her more than he did. Then he would talk of Kirton's Farm, and Goldsmith.

Jacob had not mentioned this to Lucy; he knew how it would distress her, and, after all, from what he had seen of delirium, a great deal of it might be imaginary. But Parkins's letter confirmed his worst suspicions, he feared Hester had left her husband in anger—perhaps for ever.

They were in the dressing-room which led into Hallam's chamber. Jacob softly closed the door between.

"You feel sad and anxious, Lucy, and so do I; but you must keep up a cheerful heart, and put on a bright face, or you are no fit nurse for Mr. Hallam. He is in that state when the slightest rousing of thought or attention may do terrible mischief, and for that reason, sad as your cousin's absence seems at such a time, I am thankful to be spared her sudden appearance among us just yet. Although dreadfully weakened, neither R—— nor I fear this actual illness so much as the consequences which sometimes internally result from it, and these may come almost without a warning."

"But then, surely, I ought to write to Hester?"

"By all means, and write as strongly as possible to urge her return; but in an obscure foreign town like Arden, letters often miscarry, and I was thinking whether we ought not to send for some of Mr. Hallam's own family."

"I can ask the Ainsworths about them, but, I believe, of near relations, there are only his mother and his aunt. Mrs. Hallam, I know, is in Switzerland; Miss Hallam told me she had either gone, or was just going, when she was in Stedding. I suppose the Ainsworths know where she went to from them? But, Jacob, don't you think we are better without her?"

For Lucy, like any other good nurse, had a horror of help and conflicting opinions in a sick-room, and she had seen enough of Miss Hallam to know that she would be very obstinate in her opinions.

"We must not think about ourselves, dearest; we have no right to keep his relations away from him."

"Not even if they do him harm? Jacob, that woman's silly little laugh would destroy me if I were ill."

"Perhaps not if she were your aunt, and you were used to her. I promise you that I will keep guard over Miss Hallam when she arrives, and if I think she is injudicious or interfering, I will forbid her in the sick man's room. You forget my authority there is indisputable."

Lucy was not convinced, but she yielded and returned to her post, striving to keep her thoughts from dwelling on Hester's absence from her husband, and her extraordinary silence.

Sometimes when he seemed awake and conscious, or when taking medicine or food from her, Hallam's eyes rested on her face with a searching inquiring expression, and his lips moved as if about to question; but he was too weak, and soon relapsed into the sort of listless waking dream in which his days passed.

When Mrs. Frank Wrenshaw came that afternoon to give her daily report of the children's health, Lucy asked her to go to Mrs. Ainsworth, and ascertain, if possible, where Miss Hallam was to be found.

But Mrs. Frank shook her head. She dearly loved any excuse for getting sole and undivided possession of her grandchildren, and letting them enact as much small mischief as children usually delight in committing when they are certain of applause, although Mrs. Frank would have been virtuously severe on the like misdemeanours in any one else's grandchildren than her own. Still, spite of the privilege thereby enjoyed, she thought Jacob's conduct Quixotic. What had Mr. Hallam or Hester ever done for Lucy that she should take to nursing a stranger, and turn her house into a hospital?

"Of course Jacob knows best, my dear: in your opinion he

always does ; but I should have thought it was doing quite enough to take Mr. Hallam in, without having his whole family."

"But, mamma, it's only Miss Hallam."

"Well, and I thought you didn't much like her when she was here. I know, when I said I thought she was a nice kind of body, only nervous—and that would be very bad in a sick-room—you looked as if you didn't agree with me. However, I suppose you know your own affairs best. About the children, they can stay as long as they like and welcome. You mustn't be angry with little Lucy, either, only, perhaps, it's better to tell you—but while I was playing with Baby this morning—when Faith's upstairs helping Rachel, I look after them—the little mite whipped up my scissors and cut Alice's front hair short to her head, and when I told her she mustn't touch scissors—they were naughty, sharp things that would hurt little girls—she answered, in her pretty little sedate way, that she knew that, for she'd been cutting pussy's hair first, and so she has—a great square patch right off the poor thing's back ; it was enough to make one die of laughing to think of such a mite being so clever and knowing."

Lucy involuntarily pressed her hand over her eyes.

"Ah, mother, she is too little to be trusted with scissors, indeed she is."

"Ah, my dear, that's just what I said ; but you may depend it's not the first time she's had them, or she wouldn't be so apt at using them. Well, well, she is a forward young chit ; but I'll go now, and bring you word about poor Mr. Hallam's aunt."

Lucy earnestly wished at that moment for Miss Hallam's presence, which would give her liberty to watch a little over her children. She did not doubt her mother's care ; but she knew that her love for babies was so intense that she was apt to forget the presence of the others when playing with her special darling, and her quick imagination suggested that Miss Lucy's next experiment might be tried on her sister's eye-lashes.

Mrs. Ainsworth was not sure of Miss Hallam's whereabouts ; she had left them to spend a few days with some friends with whom she had promised to take a tour among the English lakes, and thence, if fine weather lasted, to proceed to Scotland, so that there was no saying with any certainty where she was just then.

Jacob told his wife she could only write to the first address, and trust to the letter being forwarded ; it seemed strange that all near and dear to Hallam should be so widely scattered ; but then, as he observed, "Londoners are never to be found in the autumn."

CHAPTER XIX.

TO STEDDING.

STANDING there in the chestnut avenue, with little Ralphie pressed closely to her bosom, Hester listened while Parkins sorrowfully told all she knew about her master's illness, partly gathered from Mrs. Bonham's letters, and partly from Mr. King the rector, who had been over to Stedding twice to see his friend, and was very anxious and down-hearted about him, Parkins said.

"Shall Martin go round for the rector at once, ma'am?" she continued; "for he said he was to be let know directly you arrived."

Hester had stood in perfect silence, only pressing the child closer to her, but without a word or a caress; the sudden horror had numbed her senses; she roused now.

"No, I don't want Mr. King; I only want you, Parkins. I am going to Stedding at once."

The woman began to expostulate, but her words died away in an indistinct murmur, when she looked in her mistress's face, and again felt the irresistible sway of her resolute will.

Still holding the child, who looked wonderingly at her, with his deep earnest eyes, she stepped into the carriage again, and telling Parkins to get up behind, bade Martin drive to the house.

The movement pleased Ralphie, and unlocked his tongue from the surprise his mother's manner had caused.

"Where pap-pa?" he asked, inquiringly. "Poor pap-pa, all gone—all gone."

She was almost overpowered, but always accustomed to restrain emotion before others, the man's presence checked her tears.

As soon as they reached the house, she bade Martin not unharness the ponies, and then told Parkins to pack as quickly as she could, what was necessary for herself and the child, and to join her in the library.

"But oh, ma'am," said Parkins, imploringly, "you cannot travel again to-day; you are tired out; you must be faint from hunger, too, and would you take Master Ralphie such a journey so late as this?"

"Hush," said Hester firmly; "I cannot consider him at such a time; we ought both to be at Stedding now, there has been delay enough;" then seeing how sad Parkins looked: "You may send me some wine," she said, "and some bread, too; you are right, I must eat, I may want strength."

She still kept Ralphie in her arms, and as Parkins closed the door, she sank down in a chair, and holding him from her for an instant, gazed fixedly at him, as if she were striving to see his father's image in the lovely little face; then she caught him to her, and kissed him passionately again and again, till the child cried in fear at her strange wild manner.

"Ah, Ralphie, you are happy, you can cry; mamma's heart is breaking."

Parkins herself came in with the wine and bread, and Hester was calm in an instant. The servant told her mistress that it would be useless for them to start at present; there would be no train to Stedding before eight o'clock, and even then they should not arrive till after midnight. She ventured another piteous look at Ralphie, but Hester took no notice of the appeal.

"It does not signify about waiting, Parkins, I shall start directly you are ready. I must telegraph to Mr. Bonham to announce my arrival; besides, I had rather be at the station than here."

It seemed to her just then as if every moment spent in inaction were wilful delay; she thought she should not feel this so much at the station—a stage, as it were, on her journey. Besides it would be well that the Bonhams should be prepared for her coming by the telegram. Calm and business-like in her plans as ever, even then. But she let Martin drive now, and gave Ralphie in charge to Parkins; it seemed as if she must at last be alone.

"Alone—had she not always been alone, although the strong fibres of her heart's love had once struck down deep into what they had fancied nourishing pasture; had they not withered among the stones and rubbish, instead of forming a firm lasting root?"

Was she then to be alone for ever? Was this her first cup of joy, for a weary time untasted, save in anticipation, to prove the bitterest trial, the most impossible to bear of any grief yet laid upon her.

Some people, as blows fall one after another,—whether it be from some unseen comfort which takes the outward shape called resignation, or that skins thicken under the lash of misfortune, or that a consciousness of failings makes the punishment seem less than is deserved—grow used to troubles and trials, and only feel double joy, when any unforeseen and unexpected good comes like angel's visits, few and far between.

But with Hester it was not so.

She had resolved at last to humble her pride, to ask her husband to pardon her, and it seemed as if she had made atonement for her fault—it was very hard that this unutterable grief

should be laid upon her, just when she had made up her mind to try and be more like her aunt Wrenshaw; a better, a more religious woman during the rest of her life.

These thoughts tossed and troubled through her mind, on the road to the station, over-topping, as it were, for the time the grief which had hitherto seared her heart completely, and pent up all its tears. But it was only the foam cresting the waves, and obscuring them for a while, and, as it curled angrily forwards, bearing with it the tangled sea spoils, which had hitherto clouded and fouled the purity of the water beneath. . . .

The station-master told her she would have to wait a full hour and a half.

“Could she not have a special train?”

“You could have such, no doubt, and welcome from Stedding here, ma’am; but we’re not provided with them in these small places.”

She made no answer, except by telling him the message she wished sent to Jacob Bonham.

Till this was despatched there had been a motive for exertion. Now it seemed as if she must lose her senses in that dull, lonely place before the hour and a half had expired.

She went into the waiting-room, and took Ralphie from Parkins. A secret instinct made her feel that she was quieter, less rebellious with the child pressed close against her heart.

Ralphie shrank from her; he was sleepy and tired, and he had not forgotten his mother’s face in the library. Parkins, too, held him back.

“He grows heavy with sleep, ma’am, poor little dear; and you’re not used to nursing him.”

Just then the words struck Hester like a well-deserved reproach. She turned away abruptly out of the room, and paced up and down the platform.

There was still daylight, although it was a good hour darker than usual, the station-master said; the sun had set behind a dense bank of clouds, which in different shades of dark grey, looking like a huge mass of wrought iron, was fast spreading upward, gathering to itself every particle of vapour near, and infusing into it its own deepening hue.

Just then a porter lit the signal lamp, and a shrill whistle rang through the air. Hester walked towards the approaching train, thankful for any outward distraction, in what seemed an endless monotony of waiting.

"The down train from London, ma'am," the station-master said, in answer to her looks; "it stops here."

The bell was rung, and in another few moments the renewed screech of the engine as it slackened speed, told that it was going to stop. Four passengers alighted; two of them were labouring men, who had, probably, only come a short distance. But the others were gentlemen, and as one of them asked the station-master if his trap were not waiting, Hester recognized the voice of their neighbour Mr. Crathie. She drew back quickly under the roof of the platform, where the light was by this time very indistinct, and seating herself in a corner, and pulling down her veil, felt sure she should escape observation. Just then she could not have spoken to Mr. Crathie.

The train had come in early, and the station-master brought word that there was no carriage waiting.

The two gentlemen walked up and down, talking in a low voice, and gradually drawing more under the shadow of the roof. They came so near to Hester now that she could hear what they said, but they were too deep in talk to notice her.

She paid no heed to them till the sound of her own name made her start and listen eagerly.

"Yes, they are the people who live at Uplands; a young married couple," said Mr. Crathie; "that scoundrel had the management of the wife's money; she was an heiress. I wonder if they are at all prepared; if not, it will be a great shock. I suppose it will all be in the *Times* to-morrow."

"Certain to be. It is in to-night's paper," said his companion; "but if these people are friends of yours, I should let them know to-night or early to-morrow; they might by some chance miss it; and if this rascal Goldsmith had much to do with them, they should lose no time. Although, depend upon it, he is miles on his way across the Atlantic by this."

"I'll let them know at once—but come along," said Mr. Crathie; "there's my trap. Look alive, porter."

And while Hester still sat, breathless and stunned at what she had heard, they had left the station.

And this was the man she had trusted, to whom she had listened eagerly when he defamed her husband's honour. For the first time in all the trial she had been undergoing, Hester felt really humbled—crushed to the dust by the bitter proof of her error. So deep was her shame—for each moment that she reflected, Goldsmith's image seemed to blacken, and Fred's to

become more like an angel's in the truth of his love for her—that, spite of her care for wealth and power, the actual loss of fortune seemed a trifling evil, beside her sense of the deep wrong she had done her husband, and her longing to implore his pardon for it. This, then, was Goldsmith's motive in refusing to purchase Uplands; he was probably at that time a ruined man.

She had sat completely absorbed and insensible to all that was passing round her; but she felt now that some one was standing before her, trying to attract her notice.

She looked up—it was the station-master. “I beg pardon, ma'am, but don't you think, seeing how the weather has turned, that I'd best send a porter up to the house for your close carriage. You won't think of travelling to-night, ma'am, will you?”

Hester started up. The stirring breeze was gone now, and the air felt hushed and still. During the last five minutes it had grown suddenly darker—except one broad band of green light on the horizon, the grey cloud-bank had overspread all the sky, and formed a lowering canopy, which, as Hester walked forwards to the edge of the platform, seemed to bulge downwards over her head in a metallic-looking protuberance.

Before she could answer the man's question, a livid streak of forked lightning darted from it, and seemed to strike the rails at her feet. The station-master grasped her arm, and pulled her under the shelter of the roof, while an instantly following crash of thunder bellowed round them, and shook the little building.

Hester went in search of Ralphie. In general, lightning storms greatly affected his little sensitive frame; but now he was sleeping soundly. Poor Parkins was trembling with terror.

“Ah, ma'am, stay here, pray; don't leave me alone; pray don't, I shall die of fear. You'll go back home, won't you? Oh, ma'am, do, for mercy's sake! Oh! there again!” and another flash darted its ghastly light through the room.

“Hush,” said Hester, gently, “it would be cruel to wake him now; I will make one of the men come and stay with you—this place stifles me.”

Sending one of the porters in to Parkins, she returned to the edge of the platform, and stood looking at the sky.

There was a fainter flash, and the station-master said he hoped it was passing over; but the instantaneous crash that overpowered his words, showed he was mistaken. A moment's intense lull—then a jagged stream of blue flame leaped from the dark mass overhead, and seemed to strike the roof above them.

The whole building rocked and the ground shook under their feet, even amid the awful roar of the thunder, there was a sound of falling timber. Hester did not fall, but she felt faint and unable to move for several minutes. The station-master recovered himself sooner, and raising a lantern from the ground, ran rapidly along the front of the building. The day signal-pole, within twenty feet of where they were standing, had been shivered to pieces. Hester saw it plainly, and even in that awful moment her thoughts were so fixed on the coming train, that she asked the man to look whether any of the fragments had been scattered over the rails.

"The train will be here directly, now," he said, and he ran to the signal-lamp, and turned it to "danger."

Another flash, and another, and before Hester had returned from seeing if the uproar had wakened Ralphie, the engine came up; the lightning flashes making it brightly visible for an instant, and leaving light enough to make its demon-like approach—screeching as if in harmony with the elements—awful. It seemed just then to Hester as if all evil powers were let loose to prevent her journey to Stedding, and she would not be conquered by them—no, though the storm should increase tenfold. If the train went on, she would go with it—and before Parkins had at all recovered from her terror, she found herself getting into one of the carriages followed by her mistress.

The lightning flashes ceased for a few minutes, while the sky grew blacker and blacker. Some heavy drops fell, as if unwillingly, but they became more rapid and frequent, and soon the rain streamed down in torrents, which threatened to penetrate the roof of the carriage—it rattled strangely, too, against the windows, and was evidently charged with metallic pebbles.

"Thank God, ma'am, the lightning's over," said Parkins. "I'm sure, I thought as the last hour was upon us."

As if by a spell her words seemed to have stirred nature to fresh strife. Flash succeeded flash, lighting up the carriage vividly for an instant, scarcely realized—before another still more lurid returned. The roar of the thunder was less tremendous; they probably heard it less, amid the whirr of their own movement and the dash of the rain against roofs and windows—and so, on they went through that fearful storm. Parkins, half dead with terror, and Hester insensible to peril from without, the agonized dread gnawing at her heart, that she might be, after all, too late.

There was war without and within. Only the little child slept peacefully through the sad night's journey.

CHAPTER XX.

CONQUERED.

It was past twelve when Hester reached Jacob Bonham's house. She sprang out of the fly, and rang the bell herself, timidly, as if fearing whom she might awaken. She was utterly hopeless. The fatigue she had undergone, previous to the shock of the storm, had almost overpowered her. She felt that she was too late, and when Jacob opened the door himself, it seemed to her that it was but to break the tidings gently.

He took her hand, and she looked up in his face.

No, the worst was not come upon her; her husband still lived, or Jacob Bonham would not have had a smile upon his lips.

"You must come to Lucy first," he said. "Mr. Hallam is at present asleep, and may not be roused from it."

She looked wistfully at him.

"You shall see him presently; but I must see you quite composed and quiet first. Is that your little boy?" and he took Ralphie from poor exhausted Parkins.

He led the way towards the parlour, but Lucy's arms were already round her cousin, and as she drew her in Jacob gently closed the door upon them, while he himself took Parkins and Ralphie to their room, and sent Mattie to get them all they wanted.

"Poor, poor darling!" sobbed Lucy.

The fond pressure, the fonder kiss, unlocked that oppressed, sorrow-laden heart. She broke away from Lucy, and threw herself on the sofa in such a paroxysm of agony as her cousin had never witnessed. But in heart Lucy was glad to see it; she had so feared that all love was at an end between the husband and wife. As soon as Hester's sobs became less frequent and her tears flowed in a more natural manner, she went up to her, and tried to soothe her with the best words her loving heart could prompt; Hester seemed comforted; she could not speak, but she kissed Lucy and looked inquiringly at her.

"He is very ill, dearest—so ill that Jacob telegraphed this afternoon again for Dr. ——. He will be here to-morrow."

"Will *he* know me?" said Hester, so humbly and quietly that one could scarcely have imagined it herself that spoke.

She felt deeply humbled that Lucy, whom she had accustomed

herself of late years to look down upon as an inferior, should have been fulfilling her own duty to her husband, and should meet her so lovingly without a word of reproach for the past.

Lucy looked pained by the question.

"I cannot tell," she said, "he varies so; if he were to see you to-night it might increase his delirium, but I think we can manage to let you look at him."

"But I may stay with him to-night, Lucy?"

"You are not fit for it, dearest, but we will ask Jacob," said her cousin, doubtfully: "he is master, you know, she added, with a smile. And now, whether you are hungry or not, I must insist on your eating something."

Jacob came in while she was speaking; he had heard from Parkins of Hester's hurried return to England, and of the fatigue she had that day encountered, and he felt that she must be thoroughly overwrought and unable to bear suspense. He told her that Ralphie was none the worse for his journey, and would be soon asleep again; and then he asked her to follow him. She trembled so as she rose, that he drew her hand within his arm and led her upstairs. She seemed not to see anything until Lucy gently touched her, and pointed through an opening in the curtains.

There lay indeed her husband; but oh, how sadly changed! pale to whiteness, his lips purple with fever, and the features drawn and pinched as if with suffering. His eyes were closed, but he was not sleeping, for he murmured confusedly, and as Hester bent eagerly, thirstingly forward, he distinctly pronounced her name.

It was well that Jacob Bonham had kept her hand within his, or she would have thrown her arms round her husband in that moment of agony; it seemed to her that he must be dying, but that her love could hold him back to earth.

The pressure of Jacob's hand and his warning gesture called back her recollection, and after a few minutes she submitted quietly to be led away.

It was more difficult to yield when the doctor insisted on her lying down for a while; but when she resisted and said she could not leave Fred again, he told her that, cruel as it seemed, he must oppose her even entering his room till she had slept soundly for at least two hours. She would only, he said, make herself thoroughly unfit to nurse her husband at all if she persisted in watching now; and if he should wake and see her agitated, and in her exhausted state she could not help being so, the consequence might be fatal.

At last she yielded, although she said it would be impossible to close her eyes ; but Jacob was right ; and when Lucy went to look at her a short time after, she was sleeping as soundly as little Ralpie.

When Hester opened her eyes, the sun was shining brightly into the strange room. She could not recall all that had happened ; but an instant's thought brought it back, and with a sense of guilt and fear that she had slept so long, she rose and dressed herself hurriedly. Before she had finished, Lucy tapped at the door, and presently came in with Ralpie by her side.

"I have brought your boy to welcome you," she said ; "what a sweet fellow he is !"

The childish face was full of eager delight at seeing everything new and strange, and he began to tell his mother what wonders he had met with ; but Hester kissed him gently, and then turned to Lucy.

"He is still unconscious," said her cousin. "I do not think, from what Jacob says, that he has opened his eyes since you saw him ; he has been with him all night."

"How good you are !" said Hester, as she kissed her.

Jacob met her with a far more anxious expression than on the previous evening. He did not tell Hester, because it seemed needless to alarm her before the London doctor's authority confirmed his fears ; but there had been symptoms during the night which made him dread that his patient was sinking, and that there was little hope of recovery.

He did not refuse Hester when she told him that she could not leave her husband again, but let her take Lucy's place by his bedside. In the bright morning light, in the joy that she should see him again, she, the usually despondent Hester, had hoped to find him less changed than on the previous evening ; but as she stood now beside the bed, bending over him, the shock was almost worse than when she was more over-wrought. It was not possible to believe that this could be her Frederic ; the husband from whom she had parted so short a while ago.

Is there any agony like that of watching by our nearest and dearest, when they are changed almost beyond recognition, and are insensible to our tenderest words and looks ?

It may be said the agony is sharper when we have been denied the privilege ; but then it is an imaginary sorrow ; we regret we know not what ; we fancy a hundred tokens of affection, acts of

devotion we could never have shown, and to which the sufferer would have been senseless. We have not in that case stereotyped on the mind, branded into the heart, the pale stricken face, the wasted limbs, the unmistakable signs in every feeble movement, every gasping breath, of all that our darling has undergone, is still bearing. And yet who would barter these sharp pangs, this agonized remembrance, for any relief which compelled them to leave their post?

So Hester felt. Spite of all the anguish, she was happier than she had been before she knew of Fred's illness. He was all her own now, her darling; the fresh green memory of her early love seemed to cool the arid remembrance of those three years, when love had been a desert, with no one resting-place for weary thought to look upon.

If she could but live over those years again—but she would not waste her thoughts in idle wishes, bitterly repentant as she felt.

On her knees beside him, and pressing the wasted hand, which seemed powerless in hers, to her lips, she solemnly vowed, if life were spared him, to keep her marriage promises—for had she not sorely broken them? Till she saw him lying there, when all that had gone before, each link firmly riveted, passed before her in one brief moment, she had not realized this; it had seemed to her that it would be a merit to make her husband's life happy, not a sacred duty which she had taken an oath to fulfil.

Yes, she would be a good wife now, a better mother to little Ralphie; and it must be so; God was too good, too merciful, to take her Fred from her, when she had at last learned his value.

But God was merciful to the good. How dared *she* hope for mercy? No—oh, no! She could hardly restrain the shuddering sobs that shook through each limb. But there were steps approaching, and Lucy came and gently whispered they must go away for a little, while the doctors came in together.

It seemed hard to lose sight of him even for an instant, but she yielded. She told Lucy she must see the doctor afterwards, and her cousin went into the hall to watch for his coming downstairs, while Hester sat, her face covered with her hands, for there was a stillness in Jacob's face as she passed that awed her. Could it be that her husband was really worse? was there no hope?

It seemed a weary waiting. At length, to her surprise, she heard a carriage drive away, and Lucy came into the room.

She looked sadly, oh, so sadly, in her cousin's face, but for a moment she did not speak.

Then she went up to Hester, and kissed her reverently and tenderly.

"Jacob will tell you, dearest; Dr. —— wished not to see you."

She knew what they meant her to understand, but she could not receive it. She kissed Lucy, and then rising, went silently upstairs to take her place again beside her husband.

Jacob was waiting for her on the landing.

"Hester," he said, it was the first time he had called her so, "shall I tell you what Dr. —— fears, or has Lucy done so?"

"There is no hope, then?" she spoke in a strange, abrupt voice.

"He may linger some hours yet," he said, speaking very gently, "but I fear we must not hope for more."

Except that she grew paler, she seemed untouched.

"Will he ever know me again?" in the same harsh voice.

"I think so; I hope so. Stay," he said, as she was passing into the room, "consciousness seems to me to be even now returning. I am here within call, but I will not come unless you wish it. You can give him this as he revives," he put a phial in her hand; "the quantity is marked."

The permission to be alone with her husband in the first moments of his awakening, struck her with a death chill; it did not matter then, his doom was sealed. Slowly, almost fearfully, she stole round to the bedside.

There was no apparent change, except that the position was a little altered, and the breathing less difficult.

She fixed her eyes on his face, and presently—how long after she could not have told—the eyelashes quivered, and the breath was drawn more deeply. Slowly his eyes opened, not rayless and unconscious, as Lucy had described them, but with a painful, strained look of thought, that, as they gradually settled on Hester's face, concentrated into fixed wonder.

Trembling with the excess of her joy, fearing almost to breathe, lest the sound should frighten the wakening spirit, she poured out the cordial with an unsteady hand, and, gently raising his head, put the glass to his lips. It seemed to revive him greatly; he feebly raised his hand, and passed it before his eyes, as if striving to waken from some painful dream. Before, she had felt that, but for fear of wakening him, she must have thrown her arms round him, and pressed her lips to his; now she dared not, she was too guilty.

His lips moved, and she bent eagerly forward.

"My Hester," he murmured; "my own now."

"No, no," she sobbed, throwing herself beside him, "not worthy to be called yours. Oh, Fred, Fred! you cannot love, you cannot forgive even, such a guilty creature as I am. I am not fit to be your wife. I showed no mercy, and I deserve none."

He raised his hand, and laid it on her head.

"Bless you, my darling! kiss me. I need forgiveness too."

She laid her cheek on his, wound her arms round him, and so they lay still, happier in that mute, feeble embrace, than they had ever been before. . . .

Again she whispered an earnest prayer for his forgiveness.

"Hush, my darling," he said, fondly, "that is all over now."

"Yes, you can—you do forgive," she sobbed, convulsively; "but God will not—my hardness, my pride—and you so good, and loving, and noble."

He stroked her cheek fondly, as she lay sobbing beside him.

"There is no love like God's, my Hester, only trust Him."

His breathing grew more painful, he whispered, "Ralphie."

She rose gently, and gave him once more the reviving draught, and then going to the door, asked Jacob to fetch Ralphie.

He brought him in his arms, and Hallam stretched out his hand to Bonham, "It will soon be over," he said, "you will be good to her and to him. God bless you. I know you now; I knew your wife. Where is she?"

Jacob went to call her, and Hester held Ralphie to kiss his father. The child looked awe-struck, but he kissed the wasted cheek, and stroked it with his tiny hand.

"God bless you, darling!" and then he turned away his face.

Lucy came in, and pressed his hand; and then they left the husband and wife,—now at last one,—together.

"You will not murmur, dearest," he whispered, when her face was again close to his. "It is His will to take me, and it has been joy—my Hester—to have seen you once more. I know that I am dying; I heard the doctor say so, and it is best."

She could only weep, hot blinding tears, she could not keep them back now; she was not vehement, or rebellious, but it seemed as if it could not be that he was leaving her.

The hours passed on, and still he lingered. . . .

The sun shone in more and more brightly through the shaded windows, filling the room with warm light. It fell on the pale face, defining still more sharply the wasted features.

How happy, how calm he looked—like the sunshine that filled the air. No! he could not be taken from her now.

Just then the church clock struck four. In the stillness of the room, it seemed to Hester that its solemn vibration was too awful to bear. The sound roused her husband from the insensibility that was stealing over him. He opened his eyes and looked at her; oh, how tenderly! The hot tears came again, blinding her; but he did not weep. He looked happy still. Even her agony did not disturb the calm that was surely more than earthly.

“My Hester,” he said, softly, “my own one—we have both loved and suffered—we have both sinned; but I far most and first. That is over, darling,—it is such mercy to have seen you once——” He paused, exhausted.

Strive as she would, she could not speak or check her tears—she could only kiss him, and gently press her cheek against his.

He whispered presently that Lucy should read the prayers for the dying, and Hester rang the little bell Jacob had placed beside her. Lucy came, and as Hester listened, she grew calmer, more resigned. . . .

The day was dying now, the sunlight had faded, except a few lingering gleams: and still he lingered.

Suddenly a bright smile crossed his face,—

“You will come to me, darling—and Ralphie with you.”

She tried to answer, but she could not—sinking on her knees she hid her face beside him. She thought she heard him say, “Thank God,” and there was a deep shivering sigh, then silence.—A little while afterwards she knew that he was taken to his Rest.

THE END.





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